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 XV.—(Continued.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He paused, and Enid nodded. There was evidently a great struggle going on in his mind. He was grappling with something that he only partially understood, did know perfectly well that he asked to do something abing and that he was going the sake of the girl he

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

David smiled as he lighted a cigarette. "It is part of the scheme," he said. "Part of my scheme, you understand. But, principally, I sent you the note because Enid asked me to."

CHAPTER XVI.

Margaret Sees a Ghost.

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

"Just one thing," said Enid. "The good dogs have done their work well tonight, but they have not quite finished. Find Rollo for me, and bring him here quick. Then you can shut up the house, and I will see that Mr. Henson is made comfortable after his fright."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am going to bed," Enid said, wearily. "Good-night."

She went noiselessly upstairs, and Henson passed into the library. He was puzzled over this sudden end of Christianna Henson. He was half inclined to believe that she was not dead at all; he be longed to the class of men who believe not ing without proof. Well, he could easi ascertain that for himself. There would be quite time enough in the morning

For a long time Henson sat there thinksmo ing, as was his usual cus- er great men, he had his ubles, and that they were vn making did not render -. So long as Margaret the pressure of his o great object. But tions where money

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the remains of what had once been a magnificent opera-cloak over her shoulders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chris rose with a shudder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You are sure that Reginald Henson suspected nothing?"

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

CHAPTER XVII.

The Pace Slackens.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Reginald Henson. Mind you, I had no more idea of it than the dead when I went to Longdean Grange tonight. I went there because I had begun to suspect who occupied the place and to try and ascertain how the Rembrandt engraving got into 218, Brunswick Square. Miss Gates must have heard us talking over the matter, and that was why she went to Longdean Grange tonight."

"I hope she got home safe," said David. "The cabman says he put her down opposite the Lawns."

"I hope so. Well, I found out who the foe was. And I have a pretty good idea why he played that trick upon me. He knew that Enid Henson and myself were engaged; he could see what a danger to his schemes it would be to have a man like myself in the family. Then the second Rembrandt turned up, and there was his chance for wiping me off the slate. After that came the terrible family scandal between Lord Littimer and his wife. I cannot tell you anything of that, because I cannot speak with definite authority. But you could judge of the effect of it on Lady Littimer tonight.

"I haven't the faintest recollection of seeing Lady Littimer tonight."

"My dear fellow, the poor lady whom you met as Mrs. Henson is really Lady Littimer. Henson is her maiden name, and those girls are her nieces. Trouble has turned the poor woman's brain. And at the bottom of the whole mystery is Reginald Henson, who is not only nephew on his mother's side, but is also next heir but one to the Littimer title. At the present moment he is blackmailing that unhappy creature, and is manoeuvring to get the whole of her large fortune in his hands. Reginald Henson is the man those girls want to circumvent, and for that reason they came to you. And Henson has found it out to a certain extent and placed you in an awkward position."

"Witness my involuntary guest and the notes and the cigar case," David said. "But does he know what I advised one of the girls—my princess of the dark room—to do?"

"I don't fancy he does. You see, that advice was conveyed by word of mouth. The girls dared not trust themselves to correspondence, otherwise they might have approached you in a more prosaic manner. But I confess you startled me tonight."

"What do you mean by that?"

"When you sent me that note. What you virtually asked me to do was to countenance murder. When I went into the sick room I saw that Christiana Henson was dying. The first idea that flashed across my mind was that Reginald Henson was getting the girl out of the way for his own purposes. My dear fellow, the whole atmosphere literally spoke of albumen. Walker must have been blind not to see how he was being received. I was about to give him my opinion pretty plainly when your note came up to me. And there was Enid, with her whole soul in her large eyes, pleading for my silence. If the girl died I was accessory after and before the fact. You will admit that that was a pretty tight place to put a doctor in."

"That's because you didn't know the facts of the case, my dear Bell."

"Then perhaps you'll be so good as to enlighten me," Bell said, drily.

"Certainly. That was part of my scheme. In that synopsis of the story obtained by the girls by some more or less mechanical means, the reputed death of a patient forms the crux of the tale. The idea occurred to me after reading a charge against a medical student some time ago in the Standard. The man wanted to get himself out of the way; he wanted to be considered as dead, in fact. By the artful use of albumen in certain doses he produced symptoms of disease which will be quite familiar to you. He made himself so ill that his doctor naturally concluded that he was dying. As a matter of fact, he was dying. Had he gone on in the same way another day he would have been dead. Instead of this he drops the dosing and, going to his doctor in disguise, says that he is dead. He gets a certificate of his own demise, and there you are. I am not telling you fiction, but hard fact recorded in a high-class paper. The doctor gave the certificate without viewing the body. Well, it struck me that we had here the making of a good story, and I vaguely outlined it for a certain editor. In my synopsis I suggested that it was a woman who propcsed to pretend to die thus so as to lull the suspicions of a villain to sleep, and thus possess herself of certain vital documents. My synopsis falls into certain hands. The owner of those hands asks me how the thing was done. I tell her. In other words, the so-called murder that you imagined you had discovered tonight was the result of design. Walker will give his certificate, Reginald Henson will regard Miss Christiana as dead and buried, and she will be free to act for the honor of the family."

"But they might have employed somebody else."

"Who would have had to be told the history of the family dishonor. So far I fancy I have made the ground quite clear. But the mystery of the cigar-case and the notes and the poor fellow in the hospital is still as much a mystery as ever. We are like two allied forces working together, but at the same time under the disadvantage of working in the dark. You can see, of course, that the awful danger I stand in is as terrible for those poor girls."

"Of course I do. Still, we have a key to your trouble. It is a dreadfully rusty one and will want a deal of oiling before it's used, but there it is."

"Where, my dear fellow, where?" David asked.

"Why, in the Sussex County Hospital, of course. The man may die, in which case everything must be sacrificed in order to save your good name. On the other hand, he may get better, and then he will tell us all about it."

"He might. On the other hand, he might plead ignorance. It is possible for him to suggest that the whole affair was merely a coincidence, so far as he was concerned."

"Yes, but he would have to explain how he burgled your house, and what business he had to get himself half murdered in your conservatory. Let us get out here and walk the rest of the way to your house. Our cabby knows quite enough about us without having definite views as to your address."

The cabman was dismissed with a handsome douceur, and the twain turned off the front at the corner of Eastern Terrace. Late as it was, there were a few people lounging under the hospital wall, where there was a suggestion of activity about the building unusual at that time of the night. A roughlooking fellow, who seemed to have followed Bell and Steel from the front, dropped into a seat by the hospital gates and laid his head back as if utterly worn out. Just inside the gates a man was smoking a cigarette.

"Halloa, Cross," David cried, "you are out late tonight!"

"Heavy night," Cross responded, sleepily, "with half a score of accidents to finish with. Some of Palmer of Lingfield's private patients thrown off a coach and brought here in the ambulance. Unless I am greatly mistaken that is Hatherly Bell with you."

"The same," Bell said, cheerfully. "I recollect you in Edinburgh. Some of Palmer's patients have come to grief. Most of his special cases used to pass through my hands."

"I've got one here tonight who recollects you perfectly well," said Cross. "He's got a dislocated shoulder, but otherwise he is doing well. Got a mania that he's a doctor who murdered a patient."

"Electric light anything to do with the story?" Bell asked, eagerly.

"That's the man. Seems to have a wonderfully brilliant intellect if you can only keep him off that topic. He spotted you in North street yesterday, and seemed wonderfully disappointed to find you had nothing what ever to do with this institution."

"If he is not asleep," Bell suggested, "and you have no objection——"

Cross nodded and opened the gate. Before passing inside Bell took the rolled-up Rembrandt from his deep breast-pocket and handed it to David.

"Take care of this for me," he whispered. "I'm going inside. I've dropped upon an old case that interested me very much years ago, and I'd like to see my patient again. See you in the morning, I expect. Good night."

David nodded in reply and went his way. It was intensely quiet and still now; the weary loafer at the outside hospital seat had disappeared. There was nobody to be seen anywhere as David placed his key in the latch and opened the door. Inside the hall light was burning, and so was the shaded electric lamp in the conservatory. The study leading to the conservatory was in darkness. The effect of the light behind was artistic and pleasing.

It was with a sense of comfort and relief that David fastened the door behind him. Without putting up the light in the study David laid the Rembrandt on his table, which was immediately below the window in his work-room. The night was hot; he pushed the top sash down liberally.

"I must get that transparency removed," he murmured "and have the window filled with stained glass. The stuff is artistic, but it is so frankly what it assumes to be."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Common Eenemy.

David idly mixed himself some whiskey and soda water in the dining room, where he finished his cigarette. He was tired and ready for bed now, so tired that he could hardly find energy enough to remove his boots ad get into the big carpet slippers that were so old and worn. He put down the dining room lights and strolled into the study. Just for a moment he sat there contemplating with pleased, tired eyes the wilderness of bloom before him.

Then he fell into a reverie, as he frequently did. An idea for a fascinating story crept unbidden into his mind. He gazed vaguely around him. Some little noise outside attaracted his attention, the kind of noise made by a sweep's brushes up a chimney. David turned idly towards the open window. The top of it was but faintly illuminated by the light of the conservatory gleaming dully on the transparency over the glass. But David's eyes were keen, and he could see distinctly a man's thumb crooked downwards over the frame of the sash. Somebody had swarmed up the telephone holdfasts and was getting in through the window. Steel slipped well into the shadow, but not before an idea had come to him. He removed the rolled-up Rembrandt from the table and slipped it behind a row of books in the book-case. Then he looked up again at the crooked thumb.

He would recognise that thumb again anywhere. It was flat like the head of a snake, and the nail was no larger than a pea—a thumb that had evidently been cruelly smashed at one time. The owner of the thumb might have been a common burglar, but in the light of recent events David was not inclined to think so. At any rate he felt disposed to give his theory every chance. He saw a long, fustian-clad arm follow the scarred thumb, and a hand grope all over the table.

"Curse me," a foggy voice whispered, hoarsely. "It ain't here. And the bloke told me——"

The voice said no more, for David grabbed at the arm and caught the wrist in a vice-like grip. Instantly another arm shot over the window and an ugly piece of iron piping was swung perilously near Steel's head. Unfortunately, he could see no face. As he jumped back to avoid a blow his grasp relaxed, there was a dull thub outside, followed by the tearing scratch of boots against a wall and the hollow clatter of flying feet. All David could do was to close the window and regret his impetuosity had not been more judiciously restrained.

"Now, what particular thing was he after?" he asked himself. "But I had better defer any further speculations on the matter till the morning. After the fright he had my friend won't come back again. And I'm just as tired as a dog."

But there were other things the next day to occupy David's attention besides the visit of his nocturnal friend. He had found out enough the previous evening to encourage him to go farther. And surely Miss Ruth Gates could not refuse to give him further information.

He started out to call at 219, Brunswick Square, as soon as he deemed it excusable to do so. Miss Gates was out, the solemn butler said, but she might be found in the square gardens. David came upon her presently with a book in her lap and herself under a shady tree. She was not reading, her eyes were far away. As she gave David a warm greeting there was a tender bloom on her lovely face.

"Oh, yes, I got home quite right," she said. "No suspicion was aroused at all. And you?"

"I had a night thrilling enough for yellow covers, as Artemus Ward says. I came here this morning to throw myself on your mercy, Miss Gates. Were I disposed to do so, I have information enough to force your hand. But I prefer to hear everything from your lips."

"Did Enid tell you anything?" Ruth faltered.

"Well, she allowed me to know a great deal. In the first place, I know that you had a great hand in bringing me to 218 the other night. I know that it was you who suggested that idea, and it was you who facilitated the use of Mr. Gates' telephone. How the thing was stage-managed matters very little at present. It turns out now that your friend and Dr. Bell and myself have a common enemy."

Ruth looked up swiftly. There was something like fear in her eyes.

"Have—have you discovered the name of that enemy?" she asked.

"Yes, I know now that our foe is Mr. Reginald Henson."

"A man who is highly respected. A man who stands wonderfully high in public estimation. There are thousands and thousands of people who look upon him as a great and estimable creature. He gives largely in charities, he devotes a good deal of his time to the poor. My uncle, who is a good man, if you like, declares that Reginald Henson is absolutely indispensable to him. At the next election that man is certain to be returned to Parliament to represent an important northern constituency. If you told my uncle anything about him, he would laugh at you."

"I have not the slightest intention of approaching your uncle on this matter at present."

"Because you could prove nothing. Nobody can prove anything."

"But Christiana Henson may in time."

Once more Ruth flashed a startled look at her companion.

"So you have discovered something about that?" she whispered.

"I have discovered everything about it. Legally speaking, the young lady is dead. She died last night, as Dr. Walker will testify. She passed away in the formula presented by me the night that I met her in the darkness at 218, Brunswick Square. Now, will you be so good as to tell me how those girls got hold of my synopsis?"

"That came about quite naturally. Your synopsis and proof is an open envelope were accidentally slipped into a large circular envelope used by a firm of seed merchants and addressed to Longdean Grange, sent out no doubt amongst thousands of others. Chris saw it, and, prompted by curiosity, read it. Out of that our little plot was gradually evolved. You see, I was at school with those two girls, and they have few secrets from me. Naturally, I suggested the scheme because I see a great deal of Reginald Henson. He comes here; he also comes very frequently to our house in Prince's Gate. And yet I am sorry, from the bottom of my heart, that I ever touched the thing, for your sake."

The last words were spoken with a glance that set David's pulses beating. He took Ruth's half-extended hand in his, and it was not withdrawn.

"Don't worry about me," he said. "I shall come out all right in the end. Still, I shall look eagerly forward to any assistance that you can afford me. For instance, what hold has Henson got on his relatives?"

"That I cannot tell you," Ruth cried. "You must not ask me. But we were acting for the best; our great object was to keep you out of danger."

"There is no danger to me if I can only clear myself," Steel replied. "If you could only tell me where those bank-notes came from! When I think of that part of the business I am filled with shame. And yet if you only knew how fond I am of my home. . . . . At the same time, when I found that I was called upon to help ladies in distress I should have refused all offers of reward. If I had done so I should have had no need of your pity. And yet—and yet it is very sweet to me."

He pressed the hand in his, and the pressure was returned. David forgot all about his trobules for the time; and it was very cool and pleasant and quiet there.

"I am afraid that those notes were forced upon us," she said. "Though I frankly believe that the enemy does not know what we have learnt to do from you. And as to the cigar-case: would it not be easy to settle that matter by asking a few questions?"

"My dear young lady, I have done so. And the more questions I ask the worse it is for me. The cigar-case I claimed came from Walen's, beyond all question, and was purchased by the mysterious individual now in the hospital. I understood that the cigar-case was the very one I admired at Lockhart's some time ago, and——"

"If you inquire at Lockhart's you will find such to be the case."

David looked up with a puzzled expression. Ruth spoke so seriously, and with such an air of firm conviction, that he was absolutely staggered.

"So I did," he said. "And was informed in the most positive way by the junior partner that the case I admired had been purchased by an American called Smith and sent to the Metropole after he had forwarded dollar-notes for it. Surely you don't suppose that a firm like Lockhart's would be guilty of anything——"

Ruth rose to her feet, her face pale and resolute.

"This must be looked to," she said. "The cigar-case sent to you on that particular night was purchased at Lockhart's by myself and paid for with my own money!"

CHAPTER XIX.

Rollo Shows His Teeth.

The blinds were all down at Longdean Grange, a new desolation seemed to be added to the gloom of the place. Out in the village it had by some means become known that there was somebody dead in the house, either madam herself or one of those beautiful young ladies whom nobody had ever seen. Children loitering about the great lodge-gates regarded Williams with respectful awe and Dr. Walker with curicsity. The doctor was the link connecting the Grange with the outside world.

To add to the gloom of it all the bell over the stables clanged mournfully. The noise made Walker quite nervous as he walked up the drive by Williams' side. Not for a pension would he have dared approach the house alone. Williams, in the seediest and most dilapidated rusty black, had a face of deepest melancholy.

"But why that confound—— Why do they ring that bell?" Walker asked, irritably.

"Madam ordered it, sir," Williams replied. "She's queerer than ever, is mistress. She don't say much, but Miss Christiana's death is a great shock to her. She ordered the bell to be tolled, and she carried on awful when Miss Enid tried to stop it."

Walker murmured vaguely something doubtless representing sympathy.

"And my other patient, Williams?" he asked. "How is he getting along? Really, you ought to keep those dogs under better control.It's a dreadful business altogether. Fancy a man of Mr. Henson's high character and gentle disposition being attacked by a savage dog in the very house! I hope the hound is securely kenelled."

"Well, he isn't, sir," Williams said,with just the glint of a grin on his dry features. "And it wasn't altogether Rollo's fault. That dog was so devoted to Miss Christiana as you never see. And he got to know as the poor young lady was dying. So he creeps into the house and lies before her bedroom door, and when Mr. Henson comes along the dog takes it in his 'ead as he wants to go in there. And now Rollo's got inside, and nobody except Miss Enid dare go near. I pity that there undertaker when he comes."

Walker shuddered slightly. Longdean Grange was a fearful place for the nerves. Nothing of the routine or the decorous ever happened there. The fees were high and the remuneration prompt, or Walker would have handed over his patient cheerfully to somebody else. Not for a moment did he imagine that Williams was laughing at him. Well, he need not see the body, which was a comfort. With a perfectly easy conscience he could give a certificate of death. And if only somebody would stop that hideous bell. Someone was singing quietly in the drawing room, and the music seemed to be strangely bizarre and out of place.

Inside it seemed like a veritable house of the dead—the shadow of tragedy loomed everywhere. The dust rose in clouds from the floor as the servants passed to and fro. They were all clad in black, and shuffled uneasily, as if conscious that their clothes did not belong to them. Enid came out into the hall to meet the doctor. Her face seemed terribly white and drawn; there was something in her eyes that suggested anxiety more than grief.

"I suppose you have come principally to see Mr. Henson?" she said. "But my sister——"

"No occasion to intrude upon your grief for a moment, Miss Henson," Walker said, quietly. "As I have told you before, there was very little hope for your sister from the first. It was a melancholy satisfaction to me to find my diagnosis confirmed in every detail by so eminent an authority as Dr. Hatherly Bell. I will give you a certificate with pleasure—at once."

"You would like to see my sister?" Enid suggested.

The quivering anxiety was in her eyes again, the strained look on her face. Walker was discreetly silent as to what he had heard about the bloodhound, but he had by no means forgotten it.

"Not the least occasion, I assure you," he said, fervently. "Your sister had practically passed away when I last saw her. There are times when—er—you see—but really there is no necessity.

"Mr. Henson is terribly fastidious about these things."

"Then he shall be satisfied. I shall tell him that I have—er—seen the body. And I have, you know. In these matters a medical man cannot be too careful. If you will provide me with pen and ink——"

"Thank you very much. Will you come this way, please?"

Walker followed into the darwing room. Mrs. Henson, wearing something faded and dishevelled in the way of a mourning dress, was crooning some dirge at the piano. Her white hair was streaming losely over her shoulders, there was a vacant stare in her eyes. The intruders might have been statues for all the heed she took of them. Presently the discordant music ceased, and she began to pace noisely up and down the room.

"Another one gone," she murmured; "the best-beloved. It is always the best-beloved that dies, and the one we hate that is left. Take all those coaches away, send the guests back home. Why do they come chattering and feasting here? She shall be drawn by four black horses to Churchfield in the dead of the night, and there laid in the family vault."

"Mrs. Henson's residence," Enid explained, in a whisper. "It is some fifteen miles away. She has made up her mind that my sister shall be taken away as she says—tomorrow night. Is this paper all that is necessary for the—you understand? I have telephoned to the undertaker in Brighton."

Walker hastened to assure the girl that what little further formality was required he would see to himself. All he desired now was to visit Henson and get out of the house as soon as possible. As he hurried from the drawing-room he heard Mrs. Henson crooning and muttering, he saw the vacant glare in her eyes, and vaguely wondered how soon he shou have another patient here.

(To be continued.)