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 I.

"Who Speaks?"

David Steel dropped his eyes from the mirror and shuddered as a man who sees his own soul bared for the first time. And yet the mirror was in itself a thing of artistic beauty—engraved Florentine glass in a frame of deep old Flemish oak. The novelist had purchased it in Bruges, and now it stood as a joy and a thing of beauty against the full red wall over the fireplace. And Steel had glanced at himself therein and seen murder in his eyes.

He dropped into a chair with a groan for his own helplessness. Men have done that kind of thing before when the cartridges are all gone and the bayonets are twisted and broken and the brown waves of the foe come snarling over the breastworks. And then they die doggerdly with the stones in their hands, and cursing the tardy supports that brought this black shame up them.

But Steel's was ruin of another kind. The man was a fighter to his finger-tips. He had dogged determination and splendid physical courage; he had gradually thrust his way into the front rank of living novelists, though the taste of poverty was still bitter in his mouth. And how good success was now that it had come!

People envied him. Well, that was all in the sweets of the victory. They praised his blue china, they lingered before his Oriental dishes and the choice pictures on the panelled walls. The whole thing was still a constant pleasure to Steel's artistic mind. The dark walls, the old oak and silver, the red shades, and the high artistic fittings soothed him and pleased him, and played upon his tender imagination. And behind there was a study, filled with books and engravings, and beyond that again a conservatory, filled with the choicest blossoms. Steel could work with the passion flowers above his head and the tender grace of the tropical ferns about him, and he could reach his left hand for his telephone and call Fleet Street to his ear.

It was all unique, delightful, the dream of an artistic soul realized. Three years before David Steel had worked in an attic at a bare deal table, and his mother had £3 per week to pay for everything Usually there was balm in this recollection.

But not tonight, Heaven help him, not tonight! Little grinning demons were dancing on the oak cornices, there were mocking lights gleaming from Cellini tankards that Steel had given far too much money for. It had not seemed to matter just at the time. If all this artistic beauty had emptied Steel's purse there was a golden stream coming. What mattered it that the local tradesmen were getting a little restless? The great expense of the novelist's life was past. In two years he would be rich. And the pathos of the thing was not lessened by the fact that it was true. In two years' time Steel would be well off. He was terribly short of ready money, but he had just finished a seriel story for which he was to be paid £500 within two months of the delivery of the copy; two novels of his were respectively in their fourth and fifth editions. But these novels of his he had more or less given away, and he ground his teeth as he thought of it. Still, everything spelt prosperity. If he lived, David Steel was bound to become a rich man.

And yet he was ruined. Within twnety-four hours everything would pass out of his hands. To all practical purposes it had done so already. And all for the want of £1,000! Steel had earned twice that amount during the past twelve months, and the fruits of his labor were as balm to his soul about him. Within the next twelve months he could pay the debt three times over. He would cheerfully have taken the bill and doubled the amount for six months' delay.

And all this because he had become seurty for an absconding brother. Steel had put his pride in his pocket and interviewed his creditor, a little, polite, mild-eyed financier, who meant to have his money to the uttermost farthing. At first he had been suave and sympathetic, until he had discovered that Steel had debts elsewhere, and then——

Well, he had signed judgment, and tomorrow he could levy execution. Within a few hours the bottom would fall out of the universe so far as Steel was concerned. Within a few hours every butcher and baker and candle-stick maker would come abusively for his bill. Steel, who could have faced a regiment, recoiled fearfully from that. Within a week his oak and silver would have to be sold and the passion flower would wither on the walls.

Steel had not told anybody yet; the strong man had grappled with his trouble alone. Had he been a man of business he might have found some way out of the difficulty. Even his mother didn't know. She was asleep upstairs, perhaps dreaming of her son's greatness. What would the dear old mater say when she knew? Well, she had been a good mother to him, and it had been a labor of love to furnish the house for her as for himself. Perhaps there would be a few tears in these gentle eyes, but no more. Thank God, no reproaches there.

David lighted a cigarette and paced restlessly round the dining-room. Never had he appreciated its quiet beauty more than he did now. There were flowers, blood-red flowers, on the table under the graceful electric stand that Steel had designed himself. He snapped off the light as if the sight pained him, and strode into his study. For a time he stood moodily gazing at his flowers and ferns. How every leaf there was pregnant with association. There was the Moorish clock droning the midnight hour. When Steel had brought that clock——

"Ting, ting, ting. Ping, pring, ping, pring. Ting, ting, ting, ting."

But Steel heard nothing. Everything seemed as silent as the grave. It was only by a kind of inner consciousness that he knew the hour to be midnight. Midnight meant the coming of the last day. After sunrise some greasy lounger pregnant of cheap tobacco would come in and assume the he represented the sheriff, bills would be hung like banners on the outward walls, and then——

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

Bells, somewhere. Like the bells in the valley where the old vicarage used to stand. Steel vaguely wondered who now lived in the house where he was born. He was staring in the most absent way at his telephone, utterly unconscious of the shrill impatience of the little voice. He saw the quick pulsation of the striker and he came back to earth again.

Jefferies of the Weekly Messenger, of course. Jefferies was fond of a late chat on the telephone. Steel wondered grimly if Jefferies would lend him £1,000. He flung himself down in a deep lounge-chair and placed the receiver to his ear. By the deep, hoarse clang of the wires, a long-distance message, assuredly.

"From London, evidently. Halloa, London! Are you there?"

London responded that it was. A clear, soft voice spoke at length.

"Is that you, Mr. Steel? Are you qite alone? Under the circumstances you are not busy tonight"

Steel started. He had never heard the voice before. It was clear and soft and commanding, and yet there was just a suspicion of mocking irony in it.

"I'm not very busy tonight," Steel replied. "Who is speaking to me?"

"That for the present we need not go into," came the mocking voice. "As certain old-fashioned contemporaries of yours would say, 'We meet as strangers!' Stranger yet, you are quite alone!"

"I am quite alone. Indeed, I am the only one up in the house."

"Good. I have told the exchange people not to ring off till I have finished with you. One advantage of telephoning at this hour is that one is tolerably free from interruption. So your mother is asleep? Have you told her what is likely to happen to you before many hours have elapsed?"

Steel made no reply for a moment. He was restless and ill at ease tonight, and it seemed just possible that his imagination was playing him strange tricks. But, no. The Moorish clock in its frame of celebrities droned the quarter after twelve; the scent of the Dijon roses floated in from the conservatory.

"I have told nobody as yet," Steel said, hoarsely. "Who in the name of Heaven are you?"

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

"No man has ever told me so—face to face."

"Good again. I recognize the fighting ring in your voice. If you lack certain phases of moral courage, you are a man of pluck and resource. Now, somebody who is very dear to me is at present in Brighton, not very far from your own house. She is in dire need of assistance. You also are in dire need of assistance. We can be of mutual advantage to one another."

"What do you mean by that?" Steel whispered.

"Let me put the matter on a business footing. I want you to help my friend, and in return I will help you. Bear in mind that I am asking you to do nothing wrong. If you will promise me to go to a certain address in Brighton tonight and see my friend, I promise that before you sleep the sum of £1,000 in Bank of England notes shall be in your possession."

No reply came from Steel. He could not have spoken at that moment for the fee-simple of Golconda. He could only hang gasping to the telephone. Many a strange and weird plot came and went in that versatile brain, but never one more wild than this. Apparently no reply was expected, for the speaker resumed:—

"I am asking you to do no wrong. You may naturally desire to know why my friends does not come to you. That must remain my secret, our secret. We are trusting you because we know you to be a gentleman, but we have enemies who are ever on the watch. All you have to do is to go to a certain place and give a certain woman information. You are thinking that this is a strange mystery. Never was anything stranger dreamt of in your philosophy. Are you agreeable?"

The mocking tone died out of the small, clear voice until it was almost pleading.

"You have taken me at a disadvantage," Steel said. "And you know——"

"Everything. I am trying to save you from ruin. Fortune has played you into my hands. I am perfectly aware that if you were not on the verge of social extinction you would refuse my request. It is in your hands to decide. You know that Beckstein, your creditor, is absolutely merciless. He will get his money back and more besides. This is his idea of business. Tomorrow you will be an outcast—for the time, at any rate. Your local creditors will be insolent to you; people will pity you or blame you, as their disposition lies. On the other hand, you have but to say the word and you are saved. You can go and see the Brighton representatives of Beckstein's lawyers, and pay them in paper of the Bank of England."

"If I was assured of your bona-fides," Steel murmured.

A queer little laugh, a laugh of triumph, came over the wires.

"I have anticipated that question. Have you Greenwich time about you?"

Steel responded that he had. It was five-and-twenty minutes past twelve. He had quite ceased to wonder at any questions put to him now. It was all so like one of his brilliant little extravanganzas.

"You can hang up your receiver for five minutes," the voice said. "Precisely at half-past twelve you go and look on your front doorstep. Then come back and tell me what you have found. You need not fear that I shall go away."

Steel hung up the receiver, feeling that he needed a little rest. His cigarette was actually scorching his left thumb and forefinger, but he was heedless of the fact. He flicked up the dining-room lights again and rapidly made himself a sparklet soda, which he added to a small whisky. He looked almost lovingly at the gleaming Cellini tankard, at the pools of light on the fair damask. Was it possible that he was not going to lose all this, after all?

The Moorish clock in the study droned the half-hour.

David gulped down his whisky and crept shakily to the front door with a feeling on him that he was doing something stealthily. The bolts and chain rattled under his trembling fingers. Outside, the whole world seemed to be sleeping. Under the wide canopy of stars some black object picked out with shining points lay on the white marble breadth of the top step. A gun-metal cigar-case set in tiny diamonds.

The novelist fastened the front door and staggered to the study. A pretty, artistic thing such as David had fully intended to purchase for himself. He had seen one exactly like it in a jeweler's window in North street. He had pointed it out to his mother. Why, it was the very one! No doubt whatever about it! David had had the case in his hands and had reluctantly declined the purchase.

He pressed the spring, and the case lay open before him. Inside were papers, soft, crackling papers; the case was crammed with them. They were white and clean, and twenty-five of them in all. Twenty-five Bank of England notes for £10 each —£250!

David fought the dreamy feeling off and took down the telephone receiver.

"Are you there?" he whispered, as if fearful of listeners. "I—I have found your parcel."

"Containing the notes. So far so good. Yes, you are right, it is the same cigar-case you admired so much in Lockhart's the other day. Well, we have given you an instance of our bona-fides. But £250 is of no use to you at present. Beckstein's people would not accept it on account—they can make far more money by 'selling you up,' as the poetic phrase goes. It is in your hands to procure the other £750 before you sleep. You can take it as a gift, or, if you are too proud for that, you may regard it as a loan. In which case you can bestow the money on such charities as commend themselves to you. Now, are you going to place yourself entirely in my hands?"

Steel hesitated no longer. Under the circumstances few men would, as he had a definite assurance that there was nothing dishonorable to be done. A little courage, a little danger, perhaps, and he could hold up his head before the world; he could return to his desk tomorrow with the passion flowers over his head and the scent groves sweet to his nostrils. And the mater could dream happily, for there would be no sadness or sorrow in the morning.

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

"Spoken like a man," the voice cried. "Nobody will know you have left the house—you can be home in an hour. You will not be missed. Come, time is getting short, and I have my risks as well as others. Go at once to Old Steine. Stand on the path close under the shadow of the statue of George IV. and wait there. Somebody will say 'Come,' and you will follow. Good-night."

Steel would have said more, but the tinkle of his own bell told him that the stranger had rung off. He laid his cigar-case on the writing-table, slipped his cigarette-case into his pocket, satisfied himself that he had his latch-key, and put on a dark overcoat. Overhead the dear old mater was sleeping peacefully. He closed the front door carefully behind him and strode resolutely into the darkness.

CHAPTER II.

The Crimson Blind.

David walked swiftly along, his mind in a perfect whirl. Now that once he had started he was eager to see the adventure through. It was strange, but stranger things had happened. More than one correspondent with queer personal experiences had taught him that. Nor was Steel in the least afraid. He was horribly frightened of disgrace or humiliation, but physical courage he had in a high degree. And was he not going to save his home and his good name?

David had not the least doubt on the latter score. Of course he would do nothing wrong, neither would he keep the money. This he preferred to regard as a loan—a loan to be paid off before long. At any rate, money or no money, he would have been sorry to have abandoned the adventure now.

His spirits rose as he walked along, a great weight had fallen fro mhis shoulders. He smiled as he thought of his mother peacefully sleeping at home. What would his mother think if she knew? But, then, nobody was to know. That had been expressly settled in the bond.

Save for an occasional policeman the streets were deserted. It was a little cold and raw for the time of year, and a fog like a pink blanket was creeping in from the sea. Down in the Steine the big arc-lights gleamed here and there like nebulous blue globes; it was hardly possible to see across the road. In the half-shadow behind Steel the statute of the First Gentleman in Europe glowed gigantic, ghost-like in the mist.

It was marvellously still there, so still that David could hear the tinkle of the pebbles on the beach. He stood back by the gate of the gardens watching the play of the leaf silhouettes on the pavement, quaint patterns of fantastic designs thrown up in high relief by the arc-light above. From the dark foggy throat of St. James' street came the tinkle of a cycle bell. On so still a night the noise seemed bizarre and out of place. Then the cycle loomed in sight; the rider, muffled and humped over the front wheel, might have been a man or a woman. As the cyclist flashed by something white and gleaming dropped into the road, and the single word "Come" seemed to cut like a knife through the fog. That was all; the rider had looked neither to the right nor to the left, but the word was distinctly uttered. At the same instant an arm dropped and a long finger pointed to the gleaming white square in the road. It was like an instantaneous photograph—a flash and the figure had vanished in the fog.

"This grows interesting," Steel muttered. "Evidently my shadowy friend has dropped a book of rules in the road for me. The plot thickens."

It was only a plain white card that lay in the road. A few lines were typed on the back of it. The words might have been curt, but they were to the point:

"Go along the sea front and turn into Brunswick Square. Walk along the right side of the square until you reach No. 219. You will read the number over the fanlight. Open the door and it will yield to you; there is no occasion to knock. The first door inside the hall leads to the dining-room. Walk into there and wait. Drop this card down the gutter just opposite you."

David read the directions once ar twice carefully. He made a mental note of 219. After that he dropped the card down the drain-trap nearest at hand. A little way ahead of him he heard the cycle bell trilling as if in approval of his action. But David had made up his mind to observe every rule of the game. Besides, he might be rigidly watched.

The spirit of adventure was growing upon Steel now. He was no longer holding the solid result before his eyes. He was ready to see the thing through for its own sake. And as he hurried up North street, along Western Road, and finally down Preston street, he could hear the purring tinkle of the cycle bell before him. But not once did he catch sight of the shadowy rider.

All the same his heart was beating a little faster as he turned into Brunswick Square. All the houses were in pitchy darkness, as they naturally would be at 1 o'clock in the morning, so it was only with great difficulty that Steel could make out a number here and there. As he walked slowly and hesitatingly along the cycle bell drummed impatiently ahead of him.

"A hint to me," David muttered. "Stupid that I should have fogotten the directions to read the number over the fanlight. Also it is logical to suppose that I am going to find lights at No. 219. All right, my friend; no need to swear at me with that bell of yours."

He quickened his pace again and finally stopped before one of the big houses where lights were gleaming from the hall and dining room windows. They were electric lights by their great power, and, save for the hall and dniing room, the rest of the house lay in utter darkness. The cycle bell led off an approving staccato from behind the blankety fog as Steel ulled up.

There was nothing abnormal about the house, nothing that struck the adventurer's eye beyond the extraordinary vividness of the crimson blind. The two side-windows of the big bay were evidently shuttered, but the large centre gleamed like a flood of scarlet overlaid with a silken sheen. Far across the pavement the ruby track struck into the heart of the fog.

"Vivid note," Steel murmured. "I shall remember that impression."

He was destined never to forget it, but it was only one note in the gamut of adventure now. With a firm step he walked up the marble flight and turned the handle. It felt dirty and rusty to the touch. Evidently the servants were neglectful, or they were employed by people who had small regard for outward appearances.

The door opened noiselessly, and Steel closed it behind him. A Moorish lantern cast a brilliant flood of light upon a crimson carpet, a chair, and an an empty oak umbrella-stand. Beyond this there was no atom of furniture in the hall. It was impossible to see beyond the dining room door, for a heavy red velvet curtain was drawn across. David's first impression was the amazing stillness of the place. It gave him a queer feeling that a murder had been committed there, and that everybody had fled, leaving the corpse behind. As David coughed away the lump in his throat the cough sounded strangely hollow.

He passed into the dining room and looked eagerly about him. The room was handsomely furnished, if a little conventional—a big mahogany table in the centre, rows of mahogany chairs upholstered in Morocco, fine modern prints, most of them artist's proofs, on the walls. A big marble clock, flanked by a pair of vases, stood on the mantleshelf. There were a large number of blue vases on the sideboard. The red distemper had faded to a pale pink in places.

"Tottenham Court Road," Steel smiled to himself. "Modern, solid, expensive, but decidedly inartistic. Ginger jars fourteen guineas a pair, worth about as many pence. Moneyed people, solid and respectable, of the middle class. What brings them playing at mystery like this?"

The room was most brilliantly lighted both from overhead and from the walls. On the shining desert of the dining table lay a small, flat parcel addressed to David Steel, Esq. The novelist tore off the cover and disclosed a heap of crackling white papers beneath. Rapidly he fluttered the crisp sheets over—seventy-five Bank of England notes for £10 each.

It was the balance of the loan, the price paid for Steel's presence. All he had to do now was to place the money in his pocket and walk out of the house. A few steps and he would be free with nobody to say him nay. It was a temptation, but Steel fought it down. He slipped the precious notes into his pocket and buttoned his coat tightly over them. He had no fear for the coming day now.

"And yet," he murmured, "what of the price I shall have to pay for this?"

Well, it was worth a ransom. And, so long as there was nothing dishonorable attached to it, Steel was prepared to redeem his pledge. He knew perfectly well from bitter experiences that the poor man pays usurious rates for fortune's favors. And he was not without a strange sense of gratitude. If——

Click, click, click. Three electric switches were snapped off almost simultaneously outside, and the dining-room was plunged into pitchy darkness. Steel instantly caught up a chair. He was no coward, but he was a novelist with a novelist's imagination. As he stood there the sweetest, most musical laugh in the world broke on his ear. He caught the swish of silken drapery and the subtle scent that suggested the fragrance of a woman's hair. It was vague, undefined, yet soothing.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Steel," the silvery voice said. "Believe me, had there been any other way, I would not have given you all this trouble. You found the parcel addressed to you? It is an earnest of good faith. Is not that a correct English expression?"

David murmured that it was. But what did the speaker mean? She asked the question like a student of the English language, yet her accent and phrasing were perfect. She laughed again noiselessly, and once more Steel caught the subtle, entrancing perfume.

"I make no further apology for dragging you here at this time," the sweet voice said. "We knew that you were in the habit of sitting up alone late at night, hence the telephone message. You will perhaps wonder how we came to know so much of your private affairs. Rest assured that we learnt nothing in Brighton. Presently you may gather why I am so deeply interested in you; I have been for the past fortnight. You see, we were not quite certain that you would come to our assistance unless we could find some means of coercing you. Then we go to one of the smartest inquiry agents in the world and say: 'Tell us all about Mr. David Steel without delay. Money is no object.' In less than a week we know all about Beckstein. We leave matters till the last moment. If you only knew how revolting it all was!"

"So your tone seems to imply, madam," Steel said, drily.

"Oh, but truly. You were in great trouble, and we found a way to get you out. At a price; ah, yes. But your trouble is nothing compared with mine—which brings me to business. A fortnight ago last Monday you posted to Mr. Vanstone, editor of the Piccadilly Magazine, the synopsis of the first four or five chapters of a proposed serial for the journal in question. You open that story with a young and beautiful woman who is in deadly peril. Is not that so?"

"Yes," Steel said, faintly. "It is just as you suggest. But how——"

"Never mind that, because I am not going to tell you. In common parlance—is not that the word?—that woman is in a frightful fix. There is nothing strained about your heroine's situation, because I have heard of people being in a similar plight before. Mr. Steel, I want you to tell me truthfully and candidly, can you see the way clear to save your heroine? Oh, I don't mean by the long arm of coincidence or other favorite ruses known to your craft. I mean by common sense, logical methods, by brilliant ruses, by Machiavelian means. Tell me, do you see a way?"

The question came eagerly, almost imploringly, from the darkness. David could hear the quick gasps of his questioner. could catch the rustle of the silken corsage as she breathed.

"Yes," he said, "I can see a brilliant way out that would satisfy the strictest logician. But you——"

"Thank Heaven! Mr. Steel, I am your heroine. I am placed in exactly the same position as the woman whose story you are going to write. The setting is different, the local coloring is not the same, but the same deadly peril menaces me. For the love of Heaven hold out your hand to save a lonely and desperate woman whose only crime is that she is rich and beautiful. Providence had placed in my hands the gist of your heroine's story. Hence this masquerade; hence the fact that you are here tonight. I have helped you—help me in return."

It was some time before Steel spoke.

"It shall be as you wish," he said. "I will tell you how I propose to save my heroine. Her sufferings are fiction; yours will be real. But if you are to be saved by the same means, Heaven help you to bear the troubles that are in front of you. Before God, it would be more merciful for me to be silent and let you go your own way."

CHAPTER III.

The Voice in the Darkness.

David was silent for some little time. The strangeness of the situation had shut down on him again, and he was thinking of nothing else for the moment. In the dead stillness of the place he could hear the quick breathing of his companion; the rustle of her dress seemed near to him and then to be very far off. Nor did the pitchy darkness yield a jot to his now accustomed eyes. He held a hand close to his eyes, but he could see nothing.

"Well?" the sweet voice in the darkness said, impatiently. "Well?"

"Believe me, I will give you all the assistance possible. If you would only turn up the light——"

"Oh, I dare not. I have given my word of honor not to violate the seal of secrecy. You may say that we have been absurdly cautious in this matter, but you would not think so if you knew everything. Even now the wretch who holds me in his power may have guessed my strategy and be laughing at me. Some day, perhaps——"

The speaker stopped, with something like a sob in her throat.

"We are wasting precious time," she went on, more calmly. "I had better tell you my history. In your story a woman commits a crime: she is guilty of a serious breach of trust to save the life of a man she loves. By doing so she places the future and the happiness of many people in the hands of an abandoned scoundrel. If she can only manage to regain the thing she has parted from the situation is saved. Is not that so?"

"So far you have stated the case correctly," David murmured.

"As I said before, I am in practically similar case. Only, in my situation, I hastened everything and risked the happiness of many people for the sake of a little child."

"Ah!" David cried. "Your own child? No! The child of one very near and dear to you, then. From the mere novelist point of view, that is a far more artistic idea than mine. I see that I shall have to amend my story before it is puolished."

A rippling little laugh came like the song of a bird in the darkness.

"Dear Mr. Steel," the voice said, "I implore you to do nothing of the kind. You are a man of fertile imagination—a plot more or less makes no difference to you. If you publish that story you go far on the way to ruin me."

"I am afraid that I am in the dark in more senses than one," David murmured.

"Then let me enlighten you. Daily your books are more widely read. My enemy is a great novel reader. You publish that story, and what results? You not only tell that enemy my story, but you show him my way out of the difficulty, and show him how he can checkmate my every move. Perhaps, after I have escaped from the net——"

"You are right," Steel said, promptly. "From a professional point of view the story is abandoned. And now you want me to show you a rational and logical, a human way out."

"If you can do so you have my everlasting gratitude."

"Then you must tell me in detail what it is you want to recover. My heroine parts with a document which the villain knows to be a forgery. Money cannot buy it back because the villain can make as much money as he likes by retaining it. He does as he likes with the family property; he keeps my heroine's husband out of England by dangling the forgery and its consequences over his head. What is to be done? How is the ruffian to be bullied into a false sense of security by the one man who desires to throw dust in his eyes?"

"Ah," the voice cried, "ah, if you could only tell me that! Let my ruffian only imagine that I am dead; let him have proofs of it, and the thing is done. I could reach him then; I could tear from him the letter that—but I need not go into details. But he is cunning as the serpent. Nothing but the most convincing proofs would satisfy him."

"A certificate of death signed by a physician beyond reproach?"

"Yes, that would do. But you couldn't get a medical man like that to commit felony."

"No, but we could trick him into it," Steel exclaimed. "In my story a fraud is perpetrated to blind the villain and to deprive him of his weapons. It is a case of the end justifying the means. But it is one thing, my dear lady, to commit fraud actually and to perpetrate it in a novel. In the latter case you can defy the police, but unfortunately you and I are dealing with real life. If I am to help you I must be a party to a felony."

"But you will! You are not going to draw back now? Mr. Steel, I have saved your home. You are a happy man compared to what you were two hours ago. If the risk is great you have brains and imagination to get out of danger. Show me how to do it, and the rest shall be mine. You have never seen me, you know nothing, not even the name of the person who called you over the telephone. You have only to keep your own counsel, and if I wade in blood to my end you are safe. Tell me how I can die, disappear, leaving that one man to believe I am no more. And don't make it too ingenious. Don't forget that you promised to tell me a rational way out of the difficulty. How can it be done?"

"In my pocket I have a cutting from the Times, which contains a chapter from the history of a medical student who is alone in London. It closely resembles my plot. He says he has no friends, and he deems it prudent for reasons we need not discuss to let the world assume that he is dead. The rest is tolerably easy. He disguises himself and goes to a doctor of repute, whom he asks to come and see his brother—i. e., himself—who is dangerously ill. The doctor goes later in the day and finds his patent in bed with severe internal inflammation. This is brought about by a free use of albumen. I don't know what amount of albumen one would take without extreme risk, but you could pump that information out of any doctor. Well, our medical man calls again and yet again, and finds his patient sinking. The next day the patient, disguised, calls upon his doctor with the information that his 'brother' is dead. The doctor is not the least surprised, and without going to view the body gives a certificate of death. Now, I admit that all this sounds cheap and theatrical, but you can't get over facts. The thing actually happened a little time ago in London, and there is no reason why it shouldn't happen again."

"You suggest that I should do this thing?" the voice asked.

"Pardon me, I did nothing of the kind." Steel replied. "You asked me to show you how my heroine gets herself out of a terrible position, and I am doing it. You are not without friends. The way I was called up tonight and the way I was brought here prove that. With the aid of your friends the thing is possible to you. You have only to find a lodging where people are not too observant and a doctor who is too busy, or too careless, to look after dead patients, and the thing is done. If you desire to be looked upon as dead—especially by a powerful enemy—I cannot recommend a more natural, rational way than this. As to the details, they may be left to you. The clever manner in which you have kept up the mystery tonight convinces me that I have nothing to teach you in this direction. And if there is anything more I can do ——"

"A thousand, thousand thanks," the voice cried, passionately. "To be looked upon as 'dead,' to be near to the recal who smiles to think that I am in my grave. * * * And everything so dull and prosaic on the surface! Yes, I have friends who will aid me in the business. Some day I may be able to thank you face to face to tell you how I managed to see your plot. May I?"

The question came quite eagerly, almost imploringly. In the darkness Steel felt a hand trembling on his breast, a cool, slim hand, with many rings on the fingers. Steel took the hand and carried it to his lips.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," he said. "And may you be successful. Good night."

"Good night, and God bless you for a real gentleman and a true friend. I will go out of the room first and put the lights up afterwards. You will walk away and close the door behind you. The newspaper cutting! Thanks. And once more good night, but let us hope not good-bye."

She was gone. Steel could hear the distant dying swish of silk, and rustling of the portiere, and then, with a flick, the lights came up again. Half-blinded by the sudden illumination Steel fumbled his way to the door and into the street. As he did so Hove Town Hall clock chimed two. With a cigarette between his teeth David made his way home.

He could not think it all out yet; he would wait until he was in his own comfortable chair under the roses and palms leading from his study. A fine night of adventure, truly, and a paying one. He pressed the precious packet of notes to his side and his soul expanded.

He was home at last. But surely he had closed the door before he started? He remembered distinctly trying the latch. And here the latch was back and the door open. The quick snap of the electric light declared nobody in the dining room. Beyond, the study was in darkness. Nobody there, but—stop!

A stain on the carpet; another by the conservatory door. Pots of flowers scattered about, and a huddled mass like a litter of empty sacks in one corner. Then the huddled mass resolved itselw into the figure of a man with a white face smeared with blood. Dead! Oh, yes, dead enough.

Steel flew to the telephone and rang furiously.

"Give me 52, Police Station," he cried. "Are you there? Send somebody at once up here—15, Downed Terrace. There has been murder done here. For Heaven's sake come quickly."

Steel dropped the receiver and stared with strained eyes at the dreadful sight before him.

CHAPTER IV.

In Extremis.

For some time—a minute, an hour—Steel stood over the dreadful thing huddled upon the floor of his conservatory. Just then he was incapable of consecutive ideas.

His mind began to move at length. The more he thought of it the more absolutely certain he was that he had fastened the door before leaving the house. True, the latch was only an ordinary one, and a key might easily have been made to fit it. As a matter of fact, David had two, one in reserve in case of accidents. The other was usually kept in a jewel-drawer of the dressing table. Perhaps——

David went quietly upstairs. It was just possible that the murderer was in the house. But the closest search brought nothing to light. He pulled out the jewel-drawer in the dressing table. The spare latch-key had gone! Here was something to go upon.

Then there was a rumbling of an electric bell somewhere that set David's heart beating like a drum. The hall light streamed on a policeman in uniform and an inspector in a dark overcoat and a hard felt hat. On the pavement was a long shallow tray, which David recongised mechanically as the ambulance.

"Something very serious, sir?" Inspector Marley asked, quietly. "I've brought the doctor with me."

David nodded, both the inspector and the doctor were acquaintances of his. He closed the door and led the way into the study. Just inside the conservatory and not far from the huddled figure lay David's new cigar-case. Doubtless, without knowing it, the owner had whisked it off the table when he had sprung the telephone.

"'Um," Marley muttered. "Is this a clue, or yours, sir?"

He lifted the case with its diamonds gleaming like stars on a dark night. David had forgotten all about it for the time, had forgotten where it came from, or that it contained £250 in bank-notes.

"Not mine," he said. "I mean to say, of course, it is mine. A recent present. The shock of this discovery has deprived me of my senses pretty well."

Marley laid the cigar-case on the table. It seemed strange to him, who could follow a tragedy calmly, that a man should forget his own property. Meanwhile Cross was bending over the body. David could see a face smooth like that of a woman. A quick little exclamation come from the doctor.

"A drop of brandy here, and quick as possible," he commanded.

"You don't mean to say," Steel began; you don't——"

Cross waved his arm, impatiently. The brandy was procured as speedily as possible. Steel, watching intently, fancied that he detected a slight flicker of the muscles of the white, stark face.

"Bring the ambulance here," Cross said, curtly. "If we can get this poor chap to the hospital there is just a chance for him. Fortunately, we have not many yards to go."

As far as elucidation went Marley naturally looked to Steel.

"I should like to have your explanation, sir," he said, gravely.

"Positively, I have no explanation to offer," David replied. "About midnight I let myself out to go for a stroll, carefully closing the door behind me. Naturally, the door was on the latch. When I came back an hour so later, to my horror and surprise I found those marks of a struggle yonder and that poor fellow lying on the floor of the conservatory."

"'Um. Was the door fast on your return?"

"No, it was pulled to, but it was open all the same."

You didn't happen to lose your latch-key during your midnight stroll, sir"

"No, it was only when I put my key in the door that I discovered it to be open. I have a spare latch-key which I keep for emergencies, but when I went to look for it just now the key was not to be found. When I came back the house was perfectly quiet."

"What family have you, sir? And what kind of servants?"

"There is only myself and my mother, with three maids. You may dismiss any suspicion of the servants from your mind at once. My mother trained them all in the old vicarage where I was born, and not one of the trio has been with us less than twelve years."

"That simplifies matters somewhat," Marley said, thoughtfully. "Apparently your latch-key was stolen by somebody who has made careful study of your habits. Do you generally go for late walks after your household has gone to bed, sir?"

David replied somewhat grudgingly that he had never done such a thing before. He would like to have concealed the fact, but it was bound to come out sooner or later. He had strolled along the front and round Brunswick Square. Marely shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it's a bit of a puzzle to me," he admitted. "You go out for a midnight walk—a thing you have never done before—and when you come back you find somebody has got into your house by means of a stolen latch-key and murdered somebody else in your conservatory. According to that, two people must have entered the house."

"That's logic," David admitted. "There can be no murder without the slain and the slayer. My impression is that somebody who knows the ways of the house watched me depart. Then he lured his victim in here under pretence that it was his own house—he had the purloined latch-key—and murdered him. Audacious, but a far safer way than doing it out of doors."

But Marley's imagination refused to go so far. The theory was plausible enough, he pointed out respectfully, if the assassin had been assured that these midnight rambles were a matter of custom. The point was a shrewd one, and Steel had to admit it. He almost wished now that he had suggested that he often took these midnight rambles. He regretted the fiction still more when Marley asked if he had had some appointment elsewhere tonight.

"No," David said, promptly, "I hadn't."

He prevaricated without hesitation. His adventure in Brunswick Square could not possibly have anything to do with the tragedy, and nothing would be gained by betraying that trust.

"I'll run round to the hospital and come and see you again in the morning, sir," Marley said. "Whatever was the nature of the crime, it wasn't robbery, or the criminal wouldn't havt left that cigar-case of yours behind. Sir James Lythem had one stolen like that at the last races, and he valued it at £80."

"I'll come as far as the hospital with you," said Steel.

At the bottom of the flight of steps they encountered Dr. Cross and the policeman. The former handed over to Marley a pocket-book and some papers, together with a watch and chain.

"Everything that we could find upon him," he explained.

"Is the poor fellow dead yet?" David asked.

"No," Cross replied. "He was stabbed twice in the back in the region of the liver. I could not say for sure, but there is just a chance that he may recover. But one thing is pretty certain—it will be a good long time before he is in a position to say anything for himself. Good-night, Mr. Steel."

David went indoors thoughtfully, with a general feeling that something like a hand had grasped his brain and was squeezing it like a sponge. He was free from his carking anxiety now, but it seemed to him that he was paying a heavy price for his liberty. Mechanically, he counted out the bank-notes, and almost as mechanically he cut his initials on the gun-metal inside the cigar-case. He was one of the kind of men who like to have their initials everywhere.

He snapped the lights out and went to bed at last. But not to sleep. The welcome dawn came at length and David took his bath gratefully. He would have to tell his mother what had happened, suppressing all reference to the Brunswick Square episode. It was not a pleasant story, but Mrs. Steel assimilated it at length over her early tea and toast.

(To be continued.)