

The Crisson Blind

By FRED M. WHITE

CHAPTER XL—(Continued.)

With which poor consolation David returned home again. He was restless and desirous of human companionship. He even resented it, as a kind of affront, that his mother had chosen at this time to go to Hasocks to stay with an old friend for a couple of days. That Mrs. Steel knew practically nothing of her son's trouble counted for naught. Therefore it was with something akin to pleasure that David found Ruth Gates waiting in the drawing-room for him when he came in from his walk on the following afternoon. Nothing had been heard of Van Sneek in the meantime, but thanks to Chris' telephone message late the previous night he had got in touch with Bell, who was coming south without delay.

There was a look of joy pleasure in Ruth's eyes and a deep carmine flush on her cheeks.

"You don't think that this is very bold of me?" she asked.

"I am pretty bold in any case," David laughed, as he looked down fondly into the shy, sweet eyes. "And I'm too overjoyed to see you to think about anything else. I wish my mother was at home. No, I don't, because I have you all to myself."

"David! On an occasion like this you ought to be the pink of propriety. Do you know, I believe that I have made a great discovery!"

"Indeed, little girl! And what have you found out?"

"Well, you must tell me something before my discovery seems valuable. David, you are a close student of human nature. Is it possible for men of phenomenal cunning to make careless mistakes? Do the most clever criminals ever make childish blunders?"

"My dear child, if, then, David, the police would have very little chance. For instance, I have discovered that those enemies of ours got hold of the notepaper that lured Van Sneek here. They sent a messenger to Carter's, in East street, presumably knowing that my dies were there, and ordered a quarter of a ream of paper and envelopes. These were to be sent to an address in East Grinstead in a hurry. Now, that was very clever and smart, but here comes the folly. Those people, in the stress of business, actually forgot to ascertain the cost and pay for the paper, so that it was down yesterday in my last quarter's bill. Oh, yes, I assure you, the most brilliant criminals do the most incredibly foolish things."

Ruth looked relieved. Her pretty features relaxed into a smile.

"Then I fancy Reginald Henson has done so," she said. "I fancy I have solved the mystery of the cigar case. I mean, the mystery of the one I bought."

"And which was changed for the one purchased at Walen's, hence these tears. But Lockhart says that our case was really purchased by an American."

"Yes, I know. And I fancy that the manager honestly thought so. But I think I can explain that."

"It was David's turn to look up eagerly.

"Do you mean it?" he exclaimed. "It will make a wonderful difference if you can. That has been one of the most bewildering knots of the whole puzzle. If we could only trace the number of those notes, I suppose changed at the same time as the cigar case."

"Indeed they were not," Ruth cried. "I have ascertained that the case was changed by Henson, as you and I have already decided. He took the exchange not at the time we thought."

"Not when you left the package on the table for him to see?"

"No; at least I can't say. He had the other case then, probably passed on to him by Van Sneek. Or perhaps he merely ascertained what I had purchased. That was sufficient for his purpose. Of course he must have found out all about the case and what I had laid my cigar case on your doorstep a man quietly changed it for the other purchased at Walen's. But this is the alternate theory only. Any way, I am absolutely certain that we got exactly the same notes that we had placed in the original case."

"That might be," David said, thoughtfully. "But that does not explain the fact that Lockhart's sold your case to an American at the Metropole."

"I fancy I can even explain that, dear. My uncle came down suddenly to-day from London. He wanted certain papers in a great hurry. Now, those papers were locked up in a drawer at 219 given over specially to Mr. Henson. My uncle promptly broke open the drawer and took out the papers. Besides those documents the drawer contained a package in one of Lockhart's big linen-lined envelopes—a registered letter envelope, in fact. My uncle had little time to spare, as he was bound to be back in London to-night. He suggested that as the back of the drawer was broken and the envelope presumably contained valuables, I had better take it out of it. Well, I must admit at once that I steamed the envelope open. I shouldn't have done so if Lockhart's name had not been on the flap. In a little case inside I found a diamond bracelet, which I have in my pocket, together with a receipted bill for seventy odd pounds made out to me."

"To you?" David cried. "Do you mean to say that?"

"Indeed I do. The receipt was made out to me, and with it was a little polite note to the effect that Messrs. Lockhart had made the exchange of the cigar case for the diamond bracelet, and that they hoped Miss Gates would find the matter perfectly satisfactory."

David was too astonished to say anything for the moment. The keen was too tangled to be thought out all at once. Presently he began to see his way.

"Under ordinary circumstances the change seems impossible," he said. "Especially seeing that the juggling could not have been done without both the cases—but I had forgotten how easily the cases were changed. I have

it! What is the date of that letter?"

Ruth slowly unfolded a document she had taken from her purse.

"The day following what you call your great adventure," she said.

"Henson or somebody took the real case—my case—back to Lockhart's and changed it in my name. I had previously been admiring this self-same bracelet, and they had tried to sell it to me. My dear boy, don't you see this is all part of the plot to plunge you deeper and deeper into trouble, to force us all to speak to save you? There are at least fifteen assistants at Lockhart's. Of course the ultimate sale of the cigar case to this American could be proved, for years the case had got back into stock again, and at the same time the incident of the change quite forgotten. And when you go and ask questions at Lockhart's—as you should—there will be a new man there, one you are told of the sale only to the American. Depend upon it, that American was Henson himself or somebody in his pay. David, that man is too complex, too cunning. And some of these days it is going to prove his fall."

David nodded thoughtfully. And yet, without something very clever and intricate in the way of a scheme, Henson could not have placed him in his present fix.

"There is only one thing to be done," he said. "You and I must go down to Lockhart's and make a few inquiries. With that diamond bracelet and letter in your possession you should have no difficulty in refreshing their memories. Will you have some tea?"

"I am too excited," Ruth laughed. "I couldn't eat or drink anything just at present. David, what a lovely house you have."

"I'm glad to hear that you are going to like it," David said, drily.

Lockhart's received their customers in the usual courteous style. They were without any recollection of the transaction to which the pair had come. The sale of the bracelet was clear, because that was duly and properly recorded on the books, and as indeed was the sale of the gun metal cigar case to an American gentleman at the Metropole. If madam said that she had purchased the cigar case, why—still the polite assistant was most courteously incredulous.

The production of the letter made a difference. There was a passing of confidences from one plate glass counter to another, and presently another assistant came forward. He profoundly regretted that there had been a mistake, but he remembered the incident perfectly. It was the day before he had departed on his usual monthly visit to the firm's Paris branch. Madam had certainly purchased the cigar case, but before the sale could be posted in the stock ledger madam had sent a gentleman to change the case for the diamond bracelet previously admired. The speaker had attended to both the sale and the exchange; in fact, his cab was waiting for him during the latter incident.

"I trust there is nothing wrong?" he asked, anxiously.

"Not in the least," Ruth hastened to reply. "The whole matter is a kind of comedy that I wanted to solve. It is a family joke, you understand. And who made the exchange?"

"Mr. Gates, madam. A tall gentleman, dressed in."

"That is quite sufficient, thank you," said Ruth. "I am sorry to trouble you over so silly a matter."

The assistant assured madam with an air of painful reproach that nothing was counted a trouble in that establishment. He bowed his visitors out and informed them that it was a lovely afternoon, self-evident axiom that the most disputatious could not well deny.

"You see how your inquiries might have been utterly baffled but for the find of mine," Ruth said, as the two went along North street. "We shall find presently that the Metropole American and Reginald Henson are one and the same person."

"And you fancy that he made the exchange at Lockhart's?"

"I feel pretty certain of it," Ruth replied. "And you will be sure later on to find that he had a hand in the purchase of the other cigar case from Walen's. Go to Walen's and get him to make inquiries as to whether or not he has got their case down on approval."

David proceeded to do so without further delay. Inspector Marley was out, but David left a message for him. Would he communicate by telephone later on? Steel had just finished his dinner when Marley rang him up.

"Are you there? Yes, I have seen your suggestion was quite right. Customer had seen cigar case exactly like it in Lockhart's, only too dear. Walen dealt with some manufacturers and got case down. Oh, no, never saw customer again. That sort of thing happens to shopkeepers every day. Yes, Walen thinks he would recognize his man again. Nothing more? Good-night, sir."

CHAPTER XL A Delicate Errand.

It looked like being a long, dull evening for Steel if he were not going to the theatre or anything of the kind. He generally read till 11 o'clock, after which he sat up for another couple of hours plotting out the day's task for to-morrow. To-night he could only wander restlessly about his conservatory, snipping off a dead leaf here and there and wondering where the whole thing was going to end.

With a certain sense of relief David heard the front door bell trill about 11 o'clock. Somebody was coming to see him, and it didn't matter much who in Steel's present frame of mind. But he swept into the study with a feeling of genuine pleasure as Hatherly Bell was announced.

"My dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you," he cried. "Take the big armchair, and give me a cigar and a glass of whiskey and such and make you comfortable. That's better."

"I'm tired out," Bell said. "In London all day, and since six with Cross. Can you put me up for the night?"

"My bachelor bedroom is always ready, Bell."

"Thanks. I don't fancy you need be under any apprehension that anybody has spirited Van Sneek away. In the first place Henson, who seems to have discovered what happened, is in a terrible state about it. He wanted very badly to remain at Littimer, but when he heard that Van Sneek had left the hospital he came down here. In fact, we travelled together. Of course he said nothing whatever about Van Sneek, whom he is supposed to know nothing about, but I could see that he was terribly disturbed. The worst of it is that Cross was going to get me to operate on Van Sneek; and Hatherly, who seems wonderfully better, was going to assist."

"If your unfortunate friend up to that kind of thing now?" David asked.

"I fancy so. Do you know that Hatherly used to have a fairly good practice near Littimer Castle? Lord Littimer knows him well. I want Hatherly to come into this. I want to get at the reason why Henson has been so confoundedly good to Hatherly. For years he has kept his eye upon him; for years he has practically provided him with a home at Palmer's. And when Hatherly mentions Henson's name he always does so with a kind of fond gratitude."

"You think that Hatherly is going to be useful to us?"

"I fancy so. Mind you, it is only my idea—what I call intuition, for want of a better word. And what have you been doing lately?"

David proceeded to explain, giving the events of the afternoon in full detail. Bell followed the account with the deepest interest. Then he proceeded to tell his own story. David appeared to be fascinated with the tale of the man with the thumb nail.

"So Miss Chris hopes to hypnotize the man with the thumb," he said. "You have seen more of her than I have, Bell. Does she strike you as she strikes me in girl of womanly acute mind allied to a pluck and audacity absolutely brilliant?"

"She is that and more," Bell said, warmly. "Now that she is free to act she is doing wonders. I wish Lockhart cleverly she worked out that Rembrandt business, how utterly she puzzled Henson, and how she helped me to get into Littimer's good books at the reason. And now she has forced the confidence of that rascal Merritt. She has saved him from a gaol into which she might have thrown him at the present time. I am convinced that she is something exceedingly brilliant in the way of an adventurer, with a great coup ahead. Later on she will use Merritt, and a fine hard-cutting tool she will find him."

"Where is Henson at the present moment?" David asked.

"I left him in London this afternoon," Bell replied. "But I haven't the slightest doubt in the world that he has made his way to Brighton by this time. In all probability he has gone to Longdean."

Bell paused as the telephone bell rang out shrilly. The mere sound of it thrilled both of them with excitement. And what a useful thing the telephone had proved!

"Are you there?" came the quick, small whisper. "Is that you, Mr. Steel?"

"There was a long pause, during which David was listening intently. Bell could see him growing rigid with the prospect of something keen, alert and vigorous."

"Bell is here with me at this moment," he said. "Just wait a minute whilst I tell him. Don't go away, please. Under the circumstances it might be dangerous for me to ring you up."

"Just a moment. Here's a pretty mess."

"Well," Bell said, impatiently. "I'm only a mere man, after all."

"Henson is at Longdean," he turned up an hour ago, and at the present moment is having his supper in the library before going to bed. But that is not the worst part of it. Williams heard the dogs making a great noise by the gates, and went to see what was wrong. Some poor, demented fellow had climbed over the wall, and the dogs were holding him up. Fortunately, he did not seem to be conscious of his danger, and as he stood still the hounds did him no harm. Williams was going to put the intruder into the road again when Miss Henson came and told him that the man was still there. And when you suppose the poor fellow's tramp to be?"

Bell pitched his cigar into the grate full of flowers and jumped to his feet.

"Van Sneek, for a million," he cried. "My head to a cocoanut on it!"

The same. They managed to get the poor fellow into the house before Williams brought Henson from the lodge, and he's in the stables now in a rather excited condition. Now, I quite agree with Miss Henson that Henson must be kept in ignorance. Two hundred and eighty models were sent in from the United Kingdom, France, Holland, Germany and the United States, to compete for the prize, which was won by Mr. James Beeching, of Great Yarmouth, his model being the self-righting and self-bailing type. The judges, however, were not entirely satisfied with the Beeching boat, and requested Mr. James Peck, assistant master shipwright of the Woolwich dockyard, to examine the various competing designs once more, and to embody as many of the good qualities of the best plans as possible, into a new design, and the present 24-foot self-righting, self-bailing lifeboat is the result, with such improvements as the years of service since have suggested.

When the United States life-saving service was incorporated in 1872 one of the self-righting lifeboats was purchased from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution of Great Britain, and the lifeboats of the service have since been built practically upon the same principle, with some minor changes which are considered improvements.

A lifeboat should combine the following qualities to the greatest degree possible: Extra buoyancy, stability, self-bailing, self-righting, passenger accommodation, strength, speed; and no boat has yet been brought to the attention of the officials of the life-saving service which combines in so great a degree the above qualities, as the 24-foot service lifeboat recently completed by the Electric Launch Company, of Bayonne, N. J., from plans furnished by the government.

This boat is made unsummersible by means of a deck at the load waterline, and three cross bulkheads and two longitudinal bulkheads below the deck, the watertight spaces within these bulkheads being completely filled with copper air-tanks, eighty-two in number. Additional buoyancy is also obtained from the end air cases, which, though chiefly intended to assist in the self-righting quality, will alone support the boat if it is filled with water, and also from the side air cases on deck under the side thwarts, which are intended to throw any water coming on board to the amidships emptying tubes. It is estimated that the buoyancy of the boat is 1½ tons.

The self-righting and self-bailing quality of the boat is due to the arrangement of the air cases forming the extra buoyancy is such as not to interfere with the passenger carrying properties of the boat.

There is no other boat of its size that is exposed to such hard usage as a service lifeboat. It is liable to be thrown heavily upon the beach or rocks, or against a vessel's side, or to come in contact with floating wreckage. To guard against serious injury from such causes, no pains or expense are spared in its construction. The specifications call for the very best material and workmanship. The best of white oak is used for the keel, keelson, stem and stern posts, the latter, root knees. The planking is of 8-inch clear Honduras mahogany in two layers, laid diagonally across each other throughout at an angle of 45 degrees with the keel amidships, each plank not to exceed seven inches in width, and extending in one length from gunwale to gunwale on opposite sides of the boat to within eight feet of each end, and thereafter in one length from rabbet to gunwale. The end air cases or chambers also offer strong resistance to an upset.

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE LIFEBOAT

An article on "The Evolution of the Lifeboat," from the pen of Capt. C. H. McLellan, Inspector and Superintendent, United States life saving service, appeared in a recent issue of Marine Engineering, and will be of interest to readers of the Times. Don't you know, it is that Cross was going to get me to operate on Van Sneek; and Hatherly, who seems wonderfully better, was going to assist."

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The self-righting and self-bailing quality of the boat is due to the arrangement of the air cases forming the extra buoyancy is such as not to interfere with the passenger carrying properties of the boat.

There is no other boat of its size that is exposed to such hard usage as a service lifeboat. It is liable to be thrown heavily upon the beach or rocks, or against a vessel's side, or to come in contact with floating wreckage. To guard against serious injury from such causes, no pains or expense are spared in its construction. The specifications call for the very best material and workmanship. The best of white oak is used for the keel, keelson, stem and stern posts, the latter, root knees. The planking is of 8-inch clear Honduras mahogany in two layers, laid diagonally across each other throughout at an angle of 45 degrees with the keel amidships, each plank not to exceed seven inches in width, and extending in one length from gunwale to gunwale on opposite sides of the boat to within eight feet of each end, and thereafter in one length from rabbet to gunwale. The end air cases or chambers also offer strong resistance to an upset.

Between each two layers of planking

any of the end air cases above the line of flotation is ¼ ton; that of the side air cases on deck, ½ tons. A load of forty-four men taken from the works of the builder brought the deck scuppers awash.

Lateral stability or stiffness is of more importance in a lifeboat than in any other type of boat, since, from its work in the surf, it is more exposed to the risk of upsetting. This is obtained in the boat in question by the outside gunmetal keel before referred to, and by the gunmetal centreboard and the copper tanks in the air spaces below the deck. The end air cases or chambers also offer strong resistance to an upset.

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The boat is made self-righting by giving it considerable gunwale sheer, two feet four inches amidships, and by air cases or chambers at each end, six feet long, of the height of the ends, and continuing their length parallel with the waterline, having sufficient cubical contents from the thwarts upward to bear the whole weight of the boat when inverted or bottom up in the water. When the boat is forcibly held in the water with the keel uppermost, it is floated unsteadily on the bow and stern air cases, while the heavy gunmetal keel, weighing 1,650 pounds, the metal centreboard weighing 750 pounds, and the copper air cases in the hold weighing 950 pounds, being then about the centre of gravity, effects an unstable equilibrium, and the weight, falling on one side or the other of the centre of gravity, rights the boat to her ordinary position; while the water sheeps during the upset is thrown amidships by the side air cases and quickly escapes through the eight bottom bailing tubes. The raised end air cases or chambers are a great factor of safety to a lifeboat by preventing all water or other weights from loading the boat at either end, and by keeping water from breaking over the boat at the bow or stern; and giving a great resisting power to the submergence of the boat.

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