

The Crimson Blind

By FRED M. WHITE

CHAPTER L.—(Continued.)

"Which is more than I have. Pray proceed."

"He discovers that he has not got the real Prince Rupert's ring."

Rawlins looked up with a slightly puzzled air.

"Will you kindly tell me what you mean?" he said.

"It was a forgery. Van Sneek made a copy from a mere description. That copy served its purpose with a vengeance, and is now at the bottom of the North Sea. I need not go into details because it is a family secret, and does not concern our conversation at all. At that time the real ring came into Heri's possession, and he wanted a copy to hold over the head of the unfortunate lady whom he would have ruined before long. You told me just now that Van Sneek had fallen in love with Prince Rupert's ring, and could hardly bear to part with it. He didn't."

"But how could he detain it?"

"Quite easily. The copy was quite faithful, but still it was a copy. But Van Sneek made a copy that would deceive everybody. But an expert could tell the difference. He told me that Van Sneek was the real ring. Rawlins cried, excitedly.

Chris smiled, a little pleased at her success.

"Precisely," she said. "I see that you are inclined to be of my opinion."

"Well, upon my word, I am," Rawlins confessed. "But I don't quite see why."

"Please let me finish," Chris went on, excitedly. "Reginald Heri's driven back on his last trenches. He has taken out the ring after all these years, never dreaming that Van Sneek would dare to play such a trick upon him, and finds out smoothly at last. And he never sees that man when he is really angry."

"He is not pretty then," Rawlins said.

"Pretty! He is murder personified. Kindly try to imagine how he feels when he discovers he has been deceived. Mind you, this is only a theory of mine, but I feel certain that it will prove correct. Heri's last hope is snatched away from him. But he never sees that man when he is really angry."

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should have been fully justified in arresting you for the attempted murder of Van Sneek."

"But you never deemed me guilty, Marley?"

"No, I didn't," Marley said, thoughtfully. "I argued in your favor against my better judgment. I rather even now that there is a great deal for me to know."

"And which you are not going to leave," Bell said, drily. "When we have Van Sneek all right again, and ready to swear to the author of the mischief, you will have to be satisfied."

"You must stay here till you feel all right again," David suggested.

"Stay here for the night," Bell growled, sotto voce. "Stay here till tomorrow morning and hear something from Van Sneek's lips that will finish his interesting career for some time. Medical treatment be hanged. He needs clothes brush and some soap and water are all the physic that he requires."

Presently Heri's professional friend seemed to be better. His superficial injuries bore with a manly fortitude. He could afford to smile at them. But he feared that there was something internal of a sufficiently serious nature. Every time he moved he suffered exquisite agony. He smiled in a kind of way. Bell watched him as a cat watches a mouse. And he could read a deeper purpose behind that soft, caressing manner. What it was he did not know. He meant to find out before the day was past.

"Hadn't we better send him to the hospital?" David suggested.

"What for?" was Bell's brutal response. "There's nothing whatever the matter with the man."

"But he has every appearance of great pain."

"To you, perhaps, but not to me. The man is shamming. He has come here for some purpose, which will be pretty sure to transpire presently. The knave never dreams that we are watching him, and he hugs himself with the delusion that we take his story for gospel. Fancy a man in the state that he pretends to be in sending his card to you! Let him stay where we can keep an eye upon the chap. So long as he is under our observation he can't do any mischief outside."

There was wisdom in what Bell suggested, and David agreed. Despite his injuries, Heri made a fair tea at his dinner, partaken of on the dining-room sofa, was an excellent one.

"And now, do not let me detain you, as you have business," he smiled. "I shall be quite comfortable here if you will place a glass of water by my side. The pain makes me thirsty. No, you need not have any further consideration for me."

He smiled with patient resignation, the smile that he had found so effective on platforms. He lay back with his eyes half closed. He seemed to be asleep.

"I fancy we have him now," Bell said, with deep sarcasm. "We need have no further anxiety. Perfect rest is all that he requires."

Heri nodded in a sleepy fashion; his eyes were closed now till the others had left the room. On the table beside him lay a glass of water. He was alert and vigorous again.

"Ten minutes," he muttered, "say a quarter of an hour. A touch, a spot of water, and the thing is done. And I can never be found out."

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The patient came at length. Everything was ready. Van Sneek murmured something and looked vaguely about him, like a man suddenly aroused from a deep sleep. But he obeyed quite willingly when Bell commanded him to get on the table. A moment or two later and he was gone under the influence of the ether administered by Bell.

A case of glittering instruments lay on the table. The strong electric light was switched on and hung just over the head of the unconscious patient.

You hold the sponge," Bell whispered to David. "There will be very little blood. I like to have a man with it who has coolness and courage. Oh, here is the spot. Feel the depression of the skull, Heri. That is where the pressure lies, and no larger than a pea."

Heri nodded, without reply. He took up the knife, there was a flash of steel in the brilliant light and a sudden splash of blood. There was a scrape, scrape that jolted horribly on David's nerves, followed by a convulsive movement of Van Sneek's body.

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Bell was watching in deep admiration of the strong hand that was yet light as a thistle-down. The big electric light flickered for just a moment, and Heri stood upright.

"Don't be a fool," Bell said, sternly. "It's a mere matter of current." Heri muttered that it must be. Nevertheless it had given him quite a turn. His face was set and pale and his hand shook ever so slightly. The knife was cutting deep deeper.

A snarling oath broke from Bell's lips as the light flickered again and he popped out suddenly, leaving the whole room in intense darkness. Heri cried aloud. He held a hand guiding his fingers to the patient's head.

"Press the sponge down there and press hard," Bell whispered. "It's a matter of life and death. Another minute and Van Sneek would have gone. Heri, Heri, get up, pull yourself together. It was no fault of yours. The light went out—the fault is mine."

Bell stumbled down the kitchen stairs and returned with a candle. The electric light was not all over the ground floor with the exception of the hall. One of the circuits had given out completely, as sometimes happens with the electric light. Bell leapt on a table

and turned the hall light out. A second time he went to the long spare flex from the inoperative operating room to the swinging cord over the hall lamp. With a knife he cut the cord loose, he stripped the copper wire, and he rapidly joined one flex to the other.

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Snatching the hall switch—there was a sudden cry from Heri as the big lamp over his head of Van Sneek flashed up again. Bell raced into the study and shut the door.

"A trick," he gasped. "The light was put out. For heaven's sake, Heri, don't get brooding over those fancies of yours now. I tell you the thing was done deliberately. Here, if you are weak or feeble, give the knife to me."

The request had a sting in it. With an effort Heri pulled himself together.

"No," he said, firmly. "I'll do it. It was a cruel, dastardly trick. It was unmanly, but I quite see now that it was a trick. Only it's going to make a man of me instead."

Bell nodded. His eyes were blazing, but he said nothing. He watched Heri work with stern approval. Nothing could have been more scientific, more skillful. It seemed a long time to David, looking on, but it was a mere matter of minutes.

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"Will he be sensible to-morrow?" David asked.

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Once the trio were in the operating room Bell gave one rapid glance at Heri. But the latter seemed to have forgotten all his fears. There was an alert air about him, and he was quiet and steady. There was something of the joy of battle in his eyes.

"Now go and fetch Van Sneek in," Bell said.

The patient came at length. Everything was ready. Van Sneek murmured something and looked vaguely about him, like a man suddenly aroused from a deep sleep. But he obeyed quite willingly when Bell commanded him to get on the table. A moment or two later and he was gone under the influence of the ether administered by Bell.

"I fancy we have him now," Bell said, with deep sarcasm. "We need have no further anxiety. Perfect rest is all that he requires."

that, either. He would go back to the quiet house he had taken in Camp Town for a day or two, he would change his clothes and walk over to Longdon Grange, and it would go hard if he failed to get a cheque from this misadventurous day there. If he was quick he could be there by 11 o'clock.

He passed into his little room. He started back to see a man sleeping in his armchair. Then the man, disturbed by the noise of the newsmen, opened his eyes. And those eyes were gleaming with a glow that filled Heri's heart with horrible dread. It was Heri whose eyes told Heri that he knew of the latter's black treachery. Heri was face to face with death, and he knew it.

He turned and fled for his life; he scudded along the streets, past the hospital and up towards the downs, with Heri after him. The start was not long, but it was sufficient. Heri took the wrong turn, and with a heart beating fast and hard, Heri climbed upwards. It was a long time before he came to a halt. He had not felt really easy in his mind until he had passed the lodge gates at Longdon Grange, where he was fortunate enough, after a call or two, to come up William.

The latter came with more alacrity than usual. There was a queer grin on his face and a suggestion of laughter in his eyes.

"There seems to be a lot of light about," Heri cried. "Take me up to the house, and don't let anybody know I am here. Your mistress gone to bed?"

"She is in the drawing-room," Williams said, "singing. And Miss Eril's there. I am sure they will be glad to see you, sir."

Heri doubted it, but made no reply. There was a chatter of voices in the drawing-room, a chatter of a light, something that Heri had never heard before. Well, he would soon settle all that. He passed quietly into the room, then stood in puzzled