

THE CRIMSON BLIND

BY FRED M. WHITE

"A mild way of putting it," David replied. "If that fellow dies the police have enough evidence to hang me. And what is my defense? The story of my visit to No. 219. And who would believe that cock-and-bull story? Fancy a drama like that being played out in the house of such a pillar of respectability as Gilead Gates?"

"It isn't his house," said Bell. "He only takes it furnished."

"In anybody else your remark would be puerile," David said, irritably.

"It's a deeper remark, than you are aware of at present," Bell replied. "I quite see your position. Nobody would believe you, of course. But why not go to the postoffice and ask the number of the telephone that called you up from London?"

The question seemed to amuse David slightly. Then his lips were drawn humorously.

"When my logical formula came back I thought of it," David said. "On inquiring as to who it was rang me up on that fateful occasion I learnt that the number was 0017 Kensington and that—"

"Gates' own number at Prince's Gate," Bell exclaimed. "The plot thickens."

"It does, indeed," David said, grimly. "It is Wilkie Collins gone mad, Gaboriau in extremis, Du Boisgobey suffering from delirium tremens. I go to Gates' house here, and am solemnly told in the midst of surroundings that I can swear to that I have never been there before; the whole mad expedition is launched by the turning of the handle of a telephone in the house of a distinguished, trusted, if prosaic, citizen. Somebody gets hold of the synopsis of a story of mine, heaven knows how—"

"That is fairly easy. The synopsis was short, I suppose?"

"Only a few lines, say 1,000 words, a sheet of paper. My writing is very small. It was tucked into a half-penny open envelope—a magazine office envelope, marked 'Proof, urgent.' There were the proofs of a short story in the buff envelope."

"Which reached its destination in due course?"

"So I hear this morning. But how on earth—"

"Easily enough. The whole thing gets slipped into a larger open envelope, the kind of big-mouthed affair that enterprising firms send out circ—"

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lars and patterns with. This falls into the hands of the woman who is at the bottom of this and every other case, and she reads the synopsis from sheer curiosity. The cost fits her case, and there you are. Mind you, I don't say that this is how the thing actually happened, but how it might have done so. When did you post the letter?"

"I can't give you the date. Say ten days ago."

"So And there would be no hurry for a reply," Bell said, thoughtfully. "And you had no cause for worry on that head. Nor need the woman who found it have kept the envelope beyond the delay of a single post, which is only a matter of an hour or so in London. If you go a little farther, we find that money is no object, hence the £1,000 offer and the careful, and doubtless expensive inquiry into your position. Steel, I am going to enjoy this case."

"You're welcome to all the fun you can get out of it," David said, grimly. "So far as I am concerned, I fall to see the humor. Isn't this the office you are after?"

Bell nodded and disappeared, presently to return with two exceedingly rusty keys tied together with a drab piece of tape. He jingled them on his long, slender forefinger with an air of positive enjoyment.

"Now come along," he said. "I feel like a boy who has marked down something rare in the way of a bird's nest. We will go back to Brunswick Square, exactly the same way as you approached it on the night of the great adventure."

CHAPTER IX.

The Broken Figure.

"Any particular object in that course?" David asked.

"There ought to be an object in everything that even an irrational man says or does," Bell replied. "I have achieved some marvelous results by following up a single sentence uttered by a patient. Besides, on the evening in question you were particularly told to approach the house from the sea front."

"Somebody might have been on the lookout near the Western Road entrance," Steel suggested.

"Possibly. I have another theory."

"Here we are. The figures over the fanlights run from 187 upwards, gradually getting to 219 as you breast the slope. At 1 o'clock in the morning every house would be in darkness. Did you find that to be so?"

"I didn't notice a light anywhere till I reached 219."

"Good again. And you could only find 219 by the light over the door. Naturally you were not interested in and would not have noticed any other number. Well, here is 218, where I propose to enter, and for which purpose I have the keys. Come along."

David followed wonderingly. The houses in Brunswick Square are somewhat irregular in point of architecture, and Nos. 218 and 219 were the only matched pair thereabouts. Signs were not wanting, as Bell pointed out, that at one time the houses had been occupied as one residence. The two entrance-halls were back to back, so to speak, and what had obviously been a doorway leading from one to the other had been plastered up within comparatively recent memory.

The grim and dusty desolation of an empty house seemed to be supplemented here by a deeper desolation. Not that there was any dust on the ground floor, which seemed a singular thing seeing that elsewhere the boards were powdered with it, and festoons of brown cobwebs hung everywhere. Bell smiled approvingly as David Steel pointed the fact out to him.

"Do you note another singular point?" the former asked.

"No," David said, thoughtfully. "I stop! The two side-shutters in the bay-window are closed, and there is the same vivid crimson blind in the center window. And the self color of the walls is exactly the same. The faint discoloration by the fireplace is a perfect facsimile."

"In fact, this is the room you were in the other night," Bell said, quietly.

"Impossible!" Steel cried. "The blind may be an accident, so might the fading of the distemper. But the furniture, the engravings, the fittings generally—"

"Exactly what I was coming to. I noticed an old pair of slippers in the back sitting-room. Would you mind placing them against the fanlight for me?"

David complied readily enough. He was growing credulous and interested in spite of himself. At Bell's instigation he placed the slippers before the fanlight and mounted them. Over his head were the figures 218 in elongated shape and formed in white porcelain.

"Now then," Bell said, slowly. "Take this pocketknife, apply the blade to the right-hand lower half of the bottom of the 2—half the small 9, in fact—and I shall be extremely surprised if the quarter section doesn't come away from the glass of the fanlight, leaving the rest of the figure intact. Very gently, please. I want you to convince yourself that the piece comes away because it is broken, and not because the pressure has cracked it. Now then."

The point of the knife was hardly under the edge of the porcelain before the segment of the lower circle dropped into Steel's hand. He could feel that the edges of the cement sticking to his fingers. As yet the full force of the discovery was not apparent to him.

"Go out into the room and look at the fanlight," Bell directed.

David complied eagerly. A sharp cry of surprise escaped him as he looked up. The change was apparent. Instead of the figures 218 he could read now the change to 219—a fairly indifferent 9, but one that would have passed unnoticed by the most critical of 99 people out 100. With a strong light behind the figures the clumsy 9 would never have been noticed at all. This very simplicity and ingenuity of the scheme was its safeguard.

"I should like to have the address of the man who thought that out," David said drily.

"Yes, I fancy that you are dealing with quite clever people," Bell replied.

GAD EIGHTEEN—CRIMSON. . . 6 66

"And now I have shown you how utterly you have been deceived over the



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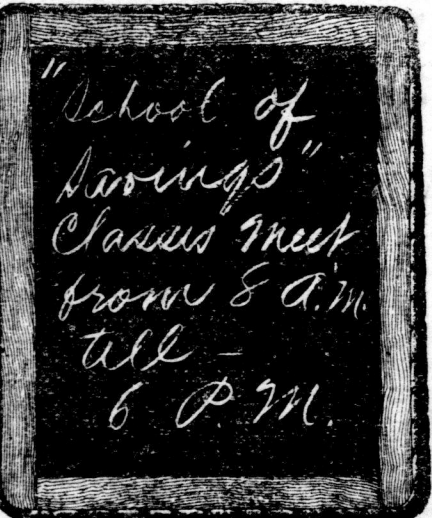
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number we will go a little farther. For the present, the way in which the furniture trick was worked must remain a mystery. But there has been furniture here, of this room and the hall would not have been so carefully swept and garnished whilst the rest of the house remains in so dirty a condition. If my eyes don't deceive me I can see two fresh nails driven into the archway leading to the back hall. On those nails hung the curtain that prevented you seeing more than was necessary. Are you still incredulous as to the house where you had your remarkable adventure?"

"I confess that my faith has been seriously shaken," David admitted.

"But about the furniture? And about my telephone call from Mr. Gates' Are you still incredulous as to the taking place in the very next house to the one taken by him at Brighton? And about Miss Gates' agitation when she learnt my identity? Do you call those coincidences?"

"No, I don't," Bell said, promptly.

"They are merely evidences of clever folks taking advantage of an excellent strategic position. I said just now that it was an important point that Mr. Gates had merely taken the next door furnished. But we shall come to that

side of the theory in due course. Have you any other objection to urge?"

"One more, and I have finished for the present. When I came here the other night—provided of course that I did come here—immediately upon my entering the dining-room the place was brilliantly illuminated. Now, directly the place was void the supply of electric current would be cut off at the meter. So far as I can judge, some two or three units must have been consumed during my visit. There could not be more than ten lights burning for an hour. Now, those units must show on the meter. Can you read an electric meter?"

"My dear fellow, there is nothing easier."

"Then let us go down into the basement and settle the matter. There is pretty sure to be a card on the meter made up to the day when the last tenant went out. See, the supply is cut off now."

As Steel spoke he snapped down the hall switch and no result came. Down in the basement by the great door stood the meter. Both switches were turned off, but on Bell pressing them down Steel was enabled to light the passage.

"There's the card," Bell exclaimed.

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ATTACKS LEOPOLD

Belgian Socialist Leader Wants Liberty for the Congo Black.

Brussels, May 2.—M. Vandervelde, the Socialist leader, in arguing today against the plan for the annexation of the Congo Independent State, now before the chamber of deputies, declared strongly that he favored the right kind of annexation, because he wished to liberate the blacks who have been the victims of such great wrongs.

He charged that King Leopold had inaugurated a reign of absolutism, under which has bought up consciences and the press.

Mr. Vandervelde characterized the confiscation of vacant Congo lands as robbery, asserting that they really belonged to the negroes. He demanded a treaty assuring greater reforms than those provided for in the present treaty, and incidentally warned the Belgian Government that the correspondence of the United States and Great Britain on the subject of the reforms might soon be published abroad.

more muddled and bewildered did he become. No complicated tangle in the way of a plot had ever been anything like the skein this was.

"I'm like a child in your hands," he said. "I'm a blind man on the end of a string; a man dazed with wine in a labyrinth. And if ever I help a woman again—"

He paused as he caught sight of Ruth Gates' lovely face through the window of No. 219. Her features were tinged with melancholy; there was a look of deepest sympathy and feeling and compassion in her glorious eyes. She slipped back as Steel bowed, and the rest of his speech was lost in a sigh.

(To Be Continued.)

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"Find out the name of the last tenant or owner," Bell suggested. "Discover what the two houses were used for when they were occupied by one person. Also ascertain why on earth the owners are willing to let a house this size and in this situation for a sum like \$80 per annum. Let us go and take the keys back to the agents."

Steel was nothing loth to find himself in the fresh air again. Some progress had been made like the opening of a chess-match between masters, and yet the more Steel thought of it the