

The Crimson Slipper.

BY DORA LANGLOIS.

Author of "A Bolt From the Blue," "The Red-Headed Woman," "The Kiss of Death," "The Secretary's Daughter," "Victoria's Dream," etc.

(Continued)

"You're Mr. Duncan, sir, ain't you?" he demanded, ducking his head towards me in the conventional humble style.

"That's my name," I replied. "And who are you?"

"I'm a private detective, and you are, it seems, the gentleman who sent for me."

"The answer brought me up with a sharp turn. I looked at the man with astonishment. He was no longer sitting on the edge of his chair with the air of one who apologizes for being alive; on the contrary, he was leaning back regarding me, not insolently, but with a smile of quiet humor.

"If you are James Howell," I said, "why in Heaven's name didn't you come up to the house and ask for me?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," he corrected me quite politely and deferentially, but, nevertheless, in the tone of one who knew his own mind. "If you think a minute you'll see that when an inquiry agent is summoned to a town which has been the scene of a very recent crime he is bound to make a few inquiries on his own hook before he takes on the offered job."

"So you have been making inquiries about me, Mr. Howell?" I said, cynically.

"Are they satisfactory may I ask?"

"As far as they go, sir," he replied. "I'll ask you to note that you sent about you in the city before I left town, and only half-an-hour later yesterday before the pulp closed; so you can hardly expect me to have done much yet." He produced a pocket-book as he spoke, and uttering the leaves continued: "Nevertheless, as I didn't know you from Adam yesterday I think I've made fair use of my time. Correct me if I've gone wrong, sir, for these are only statements not yet verified."

Then he turned coolly to his book and read aloud: "Richard Duncan, Esq., junior partner of the firm of Spalding, Currier and Duncan, Engineers, of the Barbican, now renting a shooting-box near the scene of the local tragedy from the second Sir Robert Birchall. Does not appear to have been acquainted with the deceased nor with Sir Robert and Lady Birchall, but is received at Southwicks Castle; and appears to be interested in Miss Mary Densell, a young person of equivocal position and unknown antecedents lately residing at the Barbican. That is all I've got down," he said, closing his book and looking at me squarely in the eye. "There I'm not off, sir."

"I might have considered you offensive yesterday morning," I replied, coloring slightly in spite of myself, "especially for your reference to the lady; but I don't know that I object to your analytical style now."

"Ah!" he said, slowly, "a good many things have happened since yesterday morning, I daresay."

It was just the sort of trite remark that anyone might make and mean nothing thereby; but I had an idea that Mr. Howell did not deal in the banalities of conversation, so I demanded at once: "What do you mean by that?"

"It's plain on the face of it, sir," he said. "You sent me a wire yesterday about midday. Now you were in London, where you could have seen me personally, the day before; therefore, as you didn't communicate with me on the spot, I presume that something fresh happened after you got home, and before you sent the wire. Something else happened last night, I should fancy, or you wouldn't have come home with the milk this morning with a cob that looked as if he hadn't another ten minutes' work in him, and a gent behind you on a cycle cursing you up hill and down dale."

"You seem to be pretty well informed," I said.

"It's my business to be," he answered, coolly; "in my own interests first and then in my client's. It saves time, trouble, and temper if I make sure that I shall like a job before I touch it."

"May I ask if these elaborate precautions, and the fact that you have completed your wire with the Danvers's affair mean that you doubt whether you would care to undertake my work?" I demanded.

"Not at all," he answered; "they only mean that it was my business to settle the question to my own satisfaction. I don't need to be told that a gentleman doesn't wire to me to come from London here unless something has occurred to upset his usual course of life. I do not come in any way with the crime at the Barbican; all the same, I'd have betted anyone a new hat before I left London that you couldn't give me my instructions without naming Mr. Danvers, and I am absolutely sure now that you cannot do it, sir."

"And how come you to be so certain now?" I asked.

"Without meaning to be offensive, because you are interested in Miss Densell," he replied.

"You are right," I said with a hard laugh that came from a heart sore enough. Heaven knows! "I am interested in Miss Densell. I applied last night for a warrant for her arrest."

Perhaps it was only my sick fancy that made me think the man was gazing at me too keenly; perhaps I was correct, and even then Howell read my secret, but any way I hurried on before he could question me.

"And if I had not caught you looking over my garden wall what would you have done, Mr. Howell?"

He crossed his legs, looked up at the ceiling, and answered quietly, "I should have presented myself at ten o'clock, sir, in a respectable rig, and asked for instructions."

"And if my account of myself and those notes of yours had not talked?"

"It should have told you, sir, that I was a little too busy to start the job; or something to that effect."

"Upon my word you are amazingly frank," I remarked.

"When a man is found looking over a garden wall, is collared and shaken, and dragged into a house, he consults his own dignity first, sir, by being frank," he replied.

"We will score the frankness against the shaking and cry quits," I said. "And now what next, Mr. Howell?"

"Your instructions, if you please, sir," he answered, calmly.

I simply looked at him in surprise, for the cool way in which he had treated me had certainly not led me to suppose he wanted employment or anything else from me.

"Yes," he continued, with a smile, "I'm glad you look on it that we are quits. It's sportsmanlike on your part, though to get even over personal matters is no part of my business, and I don't think you're quite aware how hard you hit. It's a good job you went for my chest and not my face—a black eye is too conspicuous, but, take it all in all, I think I shall like to work for you. I've been received in a good many ways in my time, and for a change I don't mind being punched by a man who took me for a spy on him."

I paused for a moment, and he went on: "I think I've made myself pretty plain, sir—I had to under the circumstances; but there's one thing more that I say to all my clients, without distinction of sex, position or sex, before I allow them to give themselves away by taking me into their confidence, and that thing is this. I'm a good 'feller, but I don't have the luck of some of my conferees."

"How do you mean?" I interjected.

"It's this way, sir," he explained. "I can keep my ears open and my mouth shut as well as any; I can back myself to get on a track as soon, perhaps sooner than most; but I don't have the luck in these private affairs of never finding out something just a trifle beyond what I was asked to look for. All I see and all I know goes into my report to my employer. He has only to say, 'Don't mention that little matter,' and I know where I am; but I can't go round facts to get at facts beyond them, and so sometimes I offend, and it's best for those who want to employ me to know my failing."

I rose and poured out my visitor a glass of spirits. "Mr. Howell," I said, "circumstances have arisen since I sent for you which leave me nothing to employ you on."

He did not start; if he gave any token of surprise it was no more than the nearest flicker of the eyelid—just a momentary veiling of the keen eye beneath.

"Very good," he said; "then my bill against you, sir, is one day's salary and expenses, and railway fare to and from London."

"Hold a moment," I replied, re-seating myself. "Let us make it a little more, Mr. Howell. I am going to tell you the whole case, and if there is anything I can do you may possibly see it; personally, my case appears to me to be without hope."

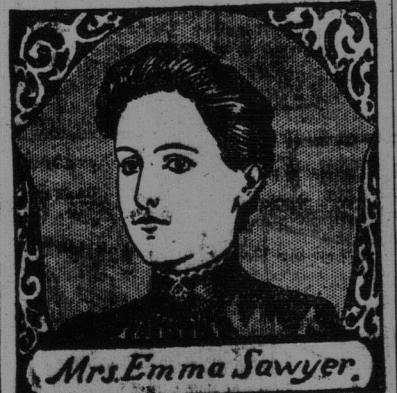
"That's when we are generally called," Howell answered. "Except in divorce cases, where a man may always hope that

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