

The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

CHAPTER VIII.—(Continued).

"It does, indeed," David said, grimly. "It is Wilkie Collins gone mad, Gaboriau in extremis, Du Bois-gobey suffering from delirium tremens. I go to Gates's house here, and am solemnly told in the midst of the 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, Heavens 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 halfpenny open envelope—a magazine office envelope, marked 'Prof. 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-mouth affair that enterprising firms send out circulars 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 case 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."

"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 fail 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 frab 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.

"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 marvellous 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 look-out near the Western Road entrance," Steel suggested.

"Possibly. I have another theory. Here we are. The figures over the fanlights run from 187 upwards, getting gradually to 219 as you breast the slope. At one 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 wondering. 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-windows are closed, and there is the same vivid crimson blind in the centre window. And the 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—"

"Are all capable of an explanation, which we shall arrive at with patience."

"Can we arrive at the number over the door with patience?"

"Exactly what I was coming to. I noticed an old pair of steps 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 steps 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 pocket-knife, apply the blade to the right-hand lower half of the bottom of the 8—to half the small o, 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 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 road 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 818 he could read now the change to 219—a fairly indifferent 9, but one that would have passed muster without criticism by ninety-nine people out of a hundred. With a strong light behind the figures the clumsy 9 would never have been noticed at all. The 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. "And now I have shown you how utterly you have been deceived over the 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 a very sweet and 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's town house? And about my next house taking place in the very next house to the one taken by him at Brighton? And about Miss Gates's agitation when she learnt my identity? Do you call them 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 the visit. There could not be many less 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 area 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. "Made up to 25th June, since when the house has been void. Just a minute whilst I read the meter. Yes, that's right. According to this the light has not been used since the index was taken, should read at 1521. What do you make of the card?"

"1532," David cried. "Which means eleven units since the meter was last taken. Or, if you like to put it from your point of view, eleven units used the night that I came here. You are quite right, Bell. You have practically convinced me that I have been inside this real 219 for the first time to-day. And yet the more one probes the mystery the more astounding does it become. What do you propose to do next?"

"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 more muddled and bewildered did he become. No complicated tangle in the way of a plot had ever been anything like the skin 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's 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.

CHAPTER X.

A bell tolled mournfully with a slow, swinging cadence like a passing bell. On winter nights folks, passing the House of the Silent Sorrow, compared the doleful clanging to the boom that carries the criminal from the cell to the scaffold. Every night all the year round the little valley of Longdean echoed to that mournful clang. Perhaps it was for this reason that a wandering poet christened the place as the House of the Silent Sorrow.

For seven years this had been going on now, until nobody but strangers noticed it. From half-past seven till eight o'clock that hideous bell rang its swinging, melancholy note. Why it was nobody could possibly tell. Nobody in the village had ever been beyond the great rusty gates leading to a dark drive of Scotch firs through one small boxy holder than the rest had once climbed the lichen-strewn stone wall and penetrated the thick undergrowth beyond. Hence he had returned, with white face and staring eyes, with the information that great wild dogs dwell in the thickets. Subsequently the village poacher confirmed this information. He was not exactly loquacious on the subject, but merely hinted that the grounds of Longdean Grange were not salubrious for naturalists with a predatory disposition.

Indeed, on moonlight nights those apocryphal hounds were heard to bay and whimper. A shepherd up late one spring night averred that he had seen two of them fighting. But nobody could say anything about them for certain; also it was equally certain that nobody knew anything about the people at Longdean Grange. The place had been shut up for thirty years, being understood to be in Chancery, when the announcement went forth that a distant relative of the family had arranged to live there in future.

What the lady of the Grange was like nobody could say. She had arrived late one night accompanied by a niece, and from that moment she had never been beyond the house. None of the large staff of servants ever left the grounds unless it was with a large bonus in money as a reward for their promise to evacuate Sussex without delay. Everything was ordered by telephone from Brighton and left at the porter's lodge. The porter was a stranger, also he was deaf and exceedingly ill-tempered, so that long since the village had abandoned the hope of getting anything out of him. One rational human being they saw from the Grange occasionally, a big man with an exceedingly benevolent face and mild, large, blue eyes—a man full of Christian kindness and given to largesse to the village boys. The big gentleman went by the name of "Mr. Charles," and was understood to have a lot of pigeons of which he was exceedingly fond. But who had got that name, or how he had got the wises' head of the village to tell, and yet, but for the mighty clamor of that hideous bell and that belt of wilderness that surrounded it, Longdean Grange was a cheerful-looking house. Any visitor emerging from the drive would have been delighted with it. For the lawns were trim and truly kept, the beds were blazing masses of flowers, the croepers over the Grange were not allowed to

riot too extravagantly. And yet the strange haunting sense of fear was there. Now and again a huge black head would uplift from the copse growth, and a long, rumbling growl come from between a double row of white teeth. For the dogs were no fiction, they lived and bred in the fifteen or twenty acres of copse round the house, where they were fed regularly and regularly thrashed without mercy if they showed in the garden. Perhaps they looked more fierce and truculent than they really were, being Cuban bloodhounds, but they gave a weird color to the place and lent it new terror to the simple folk around.

The bell was swinging dolefully over the stable-turret; it rang out its passing note till the clock struck eight and then mercifully ceased. At the same moment precisely as she had done any time the last seven years the lady of the house descended the broad oak staircase to the hall. A butler of the old-fashioned type bowed to her and announced that dinner was ready. He might have been the butler of an archbishop from his mien and deportment, yet his evening dress was seedy and shiny to the last degree, his patent leather boots had long lost their lustre, his linen was terribly frayed and yellow. Two footmen in livery stood in the hall. They might have been super's playing on the boards of a travelling theatre, their once smartly cut and trimmed coats hung raggedly upon them.

(To be Continued.)

ODDS AND ENDS.

Items of Interest From Many Countries.

Among the proposed new Paris laundry regulations is one which makes it compulsory for all laundry girls to wear indiarubber gloves while at work.

Oscar Schütz, of Innsbruck, was sentenced to six months' imprisonment for beating a postman who was five minutes late in delivering a letter from his fiancé.

One of the most curious of all the preventive medicines in China is that soup made from a black cat, which is drunk by blacksmiths in Canton to prevent burns from hot metals.

The village council of Hirsingen (Alsatia) has issued the following advertisement:—"Wanted, a good man for winding-up the steeple clock. No salary at the beginning; later on double."

According to a decision given by the County Court judge at Newark, a boy's life is twice as valuable as a girl's from the legal standpoint, and the damages in the action were assessed accordingly.

An Italian organ grinder named Antonio Mora, charged at Birmingham, England, with using obscene language, proved that the supposed "obscene language" he uttered was only his own name, and he was discharged.

A schooner, laden with sugar, grounded off the coast of New Jersey, and the cargo was thrown overboard. The proprietor of an oyster-reef in the vicinity is suing for damages, because sugar does not agree with oysters.

George Jandt, a teacher, of Halberstadt, Germany, who was sentenced recently to two years' imprisonment for ill-treatment of schoolboys, used to burn their hands by means of a burning-glass when he wanted them to confess a misdeed.

A parakeet in the Zoological Gardens, London, has lived more than fifty years without drinking anything. Patagonian llamas live for years without tasting water, and a particular class of cows bred near Losere, in France, and noted for the richness of their milk, take it extremely rarely.

Barbers and barbers' shops in Manila are by stringent law constrained to display scrupulously white coats, clean hands, the best soap, and sterilized instruments. From time to time the police make a round of the town, and arrest all razor-wielders who are not complying with the by-law.

Another attempt has been made by the inhabitants of Zug, Switzerland, to induce the authorities to permit Sunday dancing at the county tea-gardens and village inns. The Grand Council, to whom the matter was referred, has, however, sternly refused to alter the law.

One of the wonders of the Bank of England is a weighing machine, which is so delicately adjusted that it can give the accurate weight of a speck of dust, and can also weigh any amount of metal up to 400 pounds. A postage-stamp on the scale will swing an indicator on a semi-circle a space of six inches.

Parisians who suspect adulteration in the food or drink they buy take it to the municipal laboratory and have it analyzed free of cost. The city undertakes the prosecution (if need be) of the offender, who, if the case be proven, is liable not only to fine and imprisonment, but to the exposure in his shop window of a notice of "conviction of adulteration."

HOSPITAL FLOWERS.

All the hospitals and almshouses in Berlin are regularly supplied with fresh flowers from the public gardens, while twice a week each of the national schools receives from 100 to 150 specimens of four different kinds of plants for use at botany lessons.

DALAI LAMA LUCKY.

Chinese Killed All Previous Ones at the Age of 18.

Col. Waddell, a well known expert in Tibetan matters, describes how since 1749 it has been the policy at Lhasa up to the present reign to assassinate every Dalai Lama. In 1749, the Tibetans having massacred the Chinese at Lhasa, the Chinese Emperor Chaulung sent a punitive army and restored the Chinese ascendancy, and the influence of the Chinese Ambans was enormously increased. They kept the appointment of a Regent in their own hands and were the real driving power of state. Col. Waddell continues:

"Henceforth the Dalai Lama always died young. He never attained his majority. No sooner had a Dalai reached the age of 18 than he died in a mysterious manner, thus necessitating the accession of a newborn infant and prolonging the Regent's term of office. So a Regent was always in charge of the Government and he has worked in collusion with the Chinese Ambans to limit the life of the Dalai Lamas. Of the last four Dalai Lamas, one died at 11 and the other three at 18.

"The present Dalai has been permitted to become an exception to this rule. As this was a blow against the intolerable tyranny of China, the National party which has arisen in Tibet, and to whom Chinese interference has become too onerous and distasteful, is credited with having saved the present Dalai from the fate of his predecessors. Certainly he and his Government have now escaped from the Chinese leading strings.

"When the present Dalai, who was born in 1876, reached the tragic age of 18, which is regarded as the limit of a Dalai's life, the young National party by stratagem obtained the seals of office from the Regent, whom they imprisoned in a monastery, where shortly afterward he died. The Dalai Lama assumed sovereign power and deprived the Chinese Ambans of any say in the government. The latter officials procured an indignant Chinese edict from Peking, ordering that the Regent be reinstated and the seals returned. Meanwhile the Regent died, or was murdered, and a new senior Amban came to Lhasa and was bribed heavily to let matters remain as they were. He suppressed the edict, while at the same time leading the Peking Government to believe that it has been complied with.

"Afterward the opportunist young Lama, profiting by China's loss of prestige through her defeats by Japan, and afterward by the allied armies in 1900, openly refused to be guided by the Chinese, and these have now to confess how powerless they are in Tibet and how contemptuously the Tibetans regard their authority, which is now an empty farce. As recently as 1902, the Chinese Viceroy of the western province of Szechuan, which adjoins Tibet, had to ask Peking to send an army to Lhasa to make Chinese power respected."

PROJECTS FOR EGYPT.

To Spend \$107,000,000 and Reclaim 2,650,000 Acres.

The British Foreign Office has issued a blue book containing an exhaustive report by Sir William Garstin upon the basin of the upper Nile in which a gigantic programme of public work in Egypt is recommended. It is now well known how for scores of miles sodd, or river wood, marshes block the Upper Nile. Sir William Garstin estimates that the cost of cutting a proper channel would be £3,500,000.

The work is likely to have to be repeated every few years, therefore he suggests cutting a new wide course for the White Nile from Boz to Tanfika, a distance of over 200 miles, the probable cost of which would be £5,500,000. By this means the 80 per cent. of water from Lakes Victoria and Albert, now lost in the swamps between Lado and Tashoda, would be preserved. The scheme includes dams for the regulation of the overflow from Victoria and Albert.

Sir William also sketches great projects for the regulation of the Blue Nile at a point several hundred miles above Khartoum. He proposes to dam the river Gash, which is now dry half the year, and in this way irrigate the plains around Kassala.

The whole scheme will reclaim the entire Noudan and secure to Egypt constant and sufficient water supply for the whole area between the cataracts and the Mediterranean. The total cost of the scheme, including the raising of the Assouan dam and completing the Suakim-Berber Railway, is estimated at £21,400,000. Fifteen years is suggested as the time for completion.

Irrigation works would then bring 2,650,000 more acres into cultivation in Egypt and the Sudan, giving the former an additional revenue of £1,205,000 and the latter £500,000 a year.

HE'S SO CLEVER.

"Does your husband take as much interest in horse racing as he used to?"

"Yes," answered young Mrs. Torkins. "Charley can always tell the day before a race which horse ought to win and the day after why he didn't."