

The Price of Lib

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

Well, it was worth a ransom. And so long as there was nothing dishonorable attached to it, Steel was prepared to redeem his pledge. He knew perfectly well from bitter experience that the poor man pays usurious rates for fortune's favors. And he was not without a strange sense of gratitude. If—

Click, click, click. Three electric switches were snapped off almost simultaneously outside, and the dining-room was plunged into pitchy darkness. Steel instantly caught up a chair. He was no coward, but he was a novelist with a novelist's imagination. As he stood there the sweetest, most musical laugh in the world broke on his ear. He caught the wish of silken drapery and the subtle scent that suggested fragrance of a woman's hair. It was vague, undefined, yet soothing.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Steel," the silvery voice said. "Believe me, I had there been any other way, I would not have given you all this trouble. You found the parcel addressed to you? It is an earnest of good faith. Is not that a correct English expression?"

David murmured that it was. But what did the speaker mean? She asked the question like a student of the English language, yet her accent and phrasing were perfect. She laughed again noiselessly, and once more Steel caught the subtle, entrancing perfume.

"I make no further apology for dragging you here at this time," the sweet voice said. "We knew that you were in the habit of sitting up alone late at night, hence the telephone message. You will perhaps wonder how we came to know so much of your private affairs. Rest assured that we learnt nothing in Brighton. Presently you may gather why I am so deeply interested in you; I have been for the past fortnight. You see, we were not quite certain that you would come to our assistance unless we could find some means of coercing you. Then we go to one of the smartest inquiry agents in the world and say: 'Tell us all about Mr. David Steel without delay. Money is no object.' In less than a week we know all about Beckstein. We leave matters till the last moment. If you only knew how revolting it all was!"

"So your tone seems to imply, madam," Steel said, dryly. "Oh, but truly. You were in great trouble, and we found a way to get you out. At a price; ah, yes. But your trouble is nothing compared with mine—which brings me to business. A fortnight ago last Monday you posted to Mr. Vanstone, editor of the 'Piccadilly Magazine,' the synopsis of the first four or five chapters of a proposed serial for the journal in question. You open that story with a young and beautiful woman who is in deadly peril. Is not that so?"

"Yes," Steel said, faintly. "It is just as you suggest. But how—"

"Never mind that, because I am not going to tell you. In common parlance—is not that the word—that woman is in a frightful fix. There is nothing strained about your heroine's situation, because I have heard of people being in a similar plight before. Mr. Steel, I want you to tell me truthfully and candidly can you see the way clear to save your heroine? Oh, I don't mean by the long arm of coincidence or other favorite ruses known to your craft. I mean by common sense, logical methods, by brilliant ruses, by Machiavellian means. Tell me, do you see a way?"

The question came eagerly, almost imploringly, from the darkness. David could hear the quick gasps of his questioner, could catch the rustle of the silken corsage as she breathed.

"Yes," he said, "I can see a brilliant way out that would satisfy the strictest logician. But you—"

"Thank Heaven! Mr. Steel, I am your heroine. I am placed in exactly the same position as the woman whose story you are going to write. The setting is different, the local coloring is not the same, but the same deadly peril menaces me. For the love of Heaven hold out your hand to save a lonely and desperate woman whose only crime is that she is rich and beautiful. Providence had placed in my hands the gist of your heroine's story. Hence this masquerade; hence the fact that you are here to-night. I have helped you—help me in return."

It was some time before Steel spoke.

"It shall be as you wish," he said. "I will tell you how I propose to save my heroine. Her sufferings are action; yours will be real. But if you are to be saved by the same means, Heaven help you to bear the troubles that are in front of you. Before God, it would be more merciful for me to be silent and let you go your own way."

CHAPTER III.
David was silent for some little time. The strangeness of the situation had shut down on him again,

and he was thinking of notes for the moment. In the darkness of the place he could hear the quick breathing of his companion, the rustle of her dress seemed to him and then to be very near. Nor did the pitchy darkness do a jot to his now accustomed. He held a hand close to his face but he could see nothing.

"Well?" the sweet voice of darkness said, impatiently. "Believe me, I will give you assistance possible. If you only turn up the light—"

"Oh, I dare not. I have given word of honor not to violate the seal of secrecy. You may say we have been absurdly cautious in this matter, but you would not do so if you knew everything. Now the wretch who holds me in power may have guessed my story and be laughing at me. Some perhaps—"

The speaker stopped, with a sob in her throat.

"We are wasting precious time," she went on, more calmly. "I better tell you my history. In my story a woman commits a crime that she is guilty of a serious breach of trust to save the life of a man she loves. By doing so she places her future and the happiness of people in the hands of an abominable scoundrel. If she can only manage to regain the thing she has parted from the situation is saved. I am that so."

"So far you have stated the case correctly," David murmured. "As I said before, I am in practically similar case. Only, in my situation, I hastened everything and risked the happiness of many for the sake of a little child."

"Ah!" David cried. "Your child? No! The child of one near and dear to you, then. In the mere novelist point of view, is a far more artistic idea than mine. I see that I shall have to amend my story before it is published."

A rippling little laugh came from the song of a bird in the darkness.

"Dear Mr. Steel," the voice said, "I implore you to do nothing of the kind. You are a man of fertile imagination—a plot more or less makes no difference to you. If you put that story you go far on the way to ruin me."

"I am afraid that I am in the same sense than one," David murmured.

"Then let me enlighten you. Your books are more widely read than mine. My enemy is a great novel reader. He will publish that story, and what will be the result? You not only tell the enemy my story, but you show him the way out of the difficulty, and he will show him how he can checkmate my move. Perhaps, after I have escaped from the net—"

"You are right," Steel said promptly. "From a professional point of view the story is about equal. And now you want me to tell you a rational and logical, a human way out."

"If you can do so you have my everlasting gratitude."

"Then you must tell me in what way it is you want to recover. My heroine parts with a document which the villain knows to be a fortune. Money cannot buy it back because the villain can make as much as he likes by retaining it. He keeps my heroine's husband in England by dangling the fortune and its consequences over his head. What is to be done? How is the ruffian to be bullied into a false sense of security by the one man who dares to throw dust in his eyes?"

"Ah," the voice cried, "ah, ah, could only tell me that! Let me try. You only imagine that I am a villain. Let him have proofs of it, and the thing is done. I could read his mind then; I could tear from him the secret that—but I need not go into details. But he is cunning as a serpent. Nothing but the most convincing proofs would satisfy him. 'A certificate of death signed by a physician beyond reproach?'"

"Yes, that would do. But I couldn't get a medical man like that to commit felony."

"No, but we could trick him into it," Steel exclaimed. "In my story the fraud is perpetrated to blind the villain and to derive him of his possessions. It is a case of the end justifying the means. But in my story, my dear lady, to commit the thing, actually and to perpetrate it is a felony. In the latter case you defy the police, but unfortunately you and I are dealing with real life. If I am to help you I must be a party to a felony."

"But you will! You are not going to draw back now? Mr. Steel, I saved your home. You are a man compared to what you were hours ago. If the risk is great, have brains and imagination to get out of danger. Show me how to do it, and the test shall be mine. I have never seen me, you know, and I am not even the name of the man who called you over the tele-

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