POOR DOCUMENT

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THE CRIMSON BLIND

By FRED. M. WHITE, Author of "The Robe of Lucifer," etc.

A story of a novel type, stirring, fascinating; the most striking success in recent fiction.

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CHAPTER L.—Continued.

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

"Please let me finish," Chris went on, excitedly. "Reginald Henson is driven back on his last trenches. He has to get the ring for Lord Littimer. He takes out the ring after all these years, never dreaming that Van Sneck would dare to play such a trick upon him, and finds out the forgery. Did you ever see that man when he is really angry?"

"He is not pretty then," Rawlins said.

"Pretty! He is murder personified. Kindly try to imagine his feelings 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. Henson's last hope is snatched away from him. But he does not go straight to Van Sneck and accuse him of his duplicity. He knows that Van Sneck stole the ring for sheer love of the gem, and that he would not dare to part with it. He assumes that the ring is in Van Sneck's possession. And when Van Sneck threatened to expose part of the business to Mr. Steel, Henson makes no attempt to soothe him. Why? Because he sees a cunning way of getting back the ring. He himself lures Van Sneck to Mr. Steel's house, and there he almost murders him for the sake of the ring. Of course, he meant to kill Van Sneck in such a way that the blame could not possibly fall upon him."

"Can you prove that he knew anything about it?"

"I can prove that he knew who Van Sneck was at a time when the hospital people were doing their best to indentify the man. And I know how fearfully uneasy he was when he got to know that some of us were aware who Van Sneck was. It has been a pretty tangle for a long time, but the skein is all coming out smoothly at last. And if we could get the ring which Henson forced by violence from Van Sneck—"

"Excuse me. He did nothing of the kind."

Chris looked up eagerly.

"Oh," she cried, "have you more to tell me, then?"

"Nothing authentic," Rawlins said; "merely surmise. Van Sneck is going to recover. If he does it will be hard for Henson, who ought to get away with his plunder at once. Why doesn't he go and blackmail Lord Littimer and sell him the ring and clear out of the country? He doesn't do so because the ring is not yet in his possession."

"Then you imagine that Van Sneck—"

"Still has the ring probably in his possession at the present moment. If you only knew where Van Sneck happened to be."

Chris rose to her feet with an excited cry.

"I do know," she exclaimed; "he is in the house where he was half murdered. And Mr. Steel shall know all this before he sleeps tonight."

CHAPTER LI.

Heritage is Willing.

Bell's sanguine expectation that Van Sneck would be ready for an immediate operation was not quite correct. As the day wore on the man seemed more feverish and restless, which feverishness was followed by a certain want of strength. After due deliberation Dr. Cross suggested that the operation should be postponed for a day or two.

"The man is out of our hands," he said. "You have identified him, and you desire that he should remain here. It is pretty irregular altogether. And I hope I shan't get into trouble over it. Still, in such capable hands as yours—"

Bell acknowledged the compliment with a smile.

"Between Heritage and myself," he said, "we shall pull him through, eh, Heritage?"

The other doctor nodded brightly. For some little time he had been directly under Bell's influence, and that had meant a marvellous change for the better. He had lost a deal of his hesitating manner, and was looking forward to the operation with the keenest interest.

"However, I will put you all right," Bell said. "I fancy the time has come when we can confide to a certain extent in Marley. And if the police approve of Van Sneck being here, I don't see that you can say any more."

Cross was emphatically of the same opinion. Later on, in the course of a long interview with Marley, Bell and Steel opened the latter's eyes to a considerable extent.

"Well, I must congratulate you, sir," he said to Steel. "I'm bound to confess that things looked pretty black against you at one time. Indeed, I should have been fully justified in arresting you for the attempted murder of Van Sneck."

"But you never deemed me guilty, Marley?"

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

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

"That would satisfy me, sir. And I'm glad that cigar-case mystery is settled. You'll let me know how the operation goes on?"

Steel promised to do so, and the two returned to Downend Terrace together. They found Heritage a little excited and disturbed.

"Do you know I have had a visitor?" he exclaimed.

Bell started slightly. He looked just a little anxious.

"I'm going to guess it at once," he said. "Reginald Henson has been here."

"You are certainly a wonderful fellow," Heritage said, admiringly. "Nobody else could possibly have guessed that. He came to see me, of course."

"Oh, of course," Bell said, drily. "Naturally, he would have no ulterior motive. Did he happen to know that we had a kind of patient under the roof?"

Heritage explained that Henson seemed to know something about it. Also, by singular coincidence, he had met Van Sneck abroad. He expressed a desire to see the patient, but Heritage's professional caution had got the better of his friendship for once. Henson had given way finally, saying that he hoped to call again later in the day.

"It's a good thing you were firm," Bell said, grimly. "Otherwise there would have been no need for an operation on Van Sneck. My dear Heritage, it's quite time your eyes were opened to the true nature of your friend. Henson watched Steel and myself out of the house. He wanted to see Van Sneck; he has probably known from the first that the latter was here."

"Matter of philanthropy, perhaps," Heritage suggested.

"A matter of murder," Bell said, sternly. "My dear fellow, Van Sneck was nearly done to death in yonder conservatory, and his would-be assassin was Reginald Henson."

"I was never more astounded in my life," gasped Heritage. "I have always looked upon Henson as the soul of honor and integrity. And he has always been so kind to me."

"For his own purposes, no doubt. You say that he found you a home after your misfortunes came upon you. He came to see you frequently. And yet he always harped upon that wretched hallucination of yours. Why? Because you were the Carfax family doctor for a time, and at any moment you might have given valuable information concerning the suicide of Claire Carfax. Tell Heritage they story of Prince Rupert's ring, Steel."

David proceeded to do so at some length. Heritage appeared to be deeply interested. And gradually many long-forgotten things came back to him.

"I recollect it all perfectly well," he said. "Miss Carfax and myself were friends. Like most people with badly balanced intellects, she had her brilliant moments. Why, she showed me that ring with a great deal of pride, but she did not tell me its history. She was very strange in her manner that morning; indeed, I warned her father that she wanted to be most carefully looked after."

"Did she say how she got the ring?" Steel asked.

Heritage did not answer for a moment.

"Oh, yes," he said, presently. "She said it was a present from a good boy, and that Reginald Henson had given it her in an envelope. I met Henson close by, but I didn't mention the ring."

"And there you have the whole thing in a nutshell!" Bell exclaimed. "Nothing of this came out at the inquest, because the ring story was hushed up, and Heritage was not called because he had nothing to do with the suicide. But Henson probably saw poor Claire Carfax show you the ring, and he got a bit frightened, and he kept an eye upon you afterwards. When you broke down he looked after you, and he took precious good care to keep your hallucination always before your eyes. Whenever he came to see you he always did that."

"You are quite right there," Heritage admitted. "He mentioned it this afternoon when I said I was going to take part in the operation on Van Sneck. He asked me if I thought it wise to try my nerves so soon again with the electric light."

"And I hope you told him he was talking nonsense," Bell said, hastily. "There, let us change the subject. The mere mention of that man's name stifles me."

Morning brought a long letter from Chris Henson to David, giving him in detail the result of her recent interview with John Rawlins. There was a postscript to the letter which David showed to Bell with a certain malicious glee.

"A nasty one for our friend Henson," he said. "What a sweet surprise it will be for that picturesque gentleman the next time he goes blackmailing to Longdean Grange."

Bell chuckled in his turn. The net was drawing very close about Henson.

"How is Van Sneck today?" David asked.

"Much better," Bell replied. "I propose to operate tonight. I'm glad to hear that your mother is going to be away a day or two longer."

Heritage appeared to be ready and eager for the work before him. A specially powerful electric light had been rigged up in connection with the study lamp, and an operating table improvised from the kitchen. More than once Bell looked eagerly at Heritage, but the latter stood the scrutiny bravely. Once the operation was successfully through, Heritage would never suffer from hallucinations again.

"I fancy everything is ready now," Bell said, at length. "After dinner tonight and this thing will be done. Then the story will be told—"

"Mr. Reginald Henson to see you, sir."

A servant looked in with this information and a card on a tray. There was a slight commotion outside, the vision of a partially wrecked bicycle on the path, and a dusty figure in the hall with his head in his hand.

"The gentleman has met with an accident, sir," the parlor maid said. Henson seemed to be knocked about a great deal. He was riding down the terrace, he said, when suddenly he ran over a dog, and—

"What sort of a dog?" Bell snapped out.

"What color and size?"

Henson was utterly taken aback by the suddenness of the question. He gasped and stammered. He could not have told Bell more plainly that the "accident" was an artistic fake.

"You may 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 Sneck's lips that will finish his interesting career for some time. Medical treatment be hanged. A clothes brush and some soap and water are all the physic that he requires."

Presently Henson professed himself to be better. His superficial injuries he bore with a manly fortitude quite worthy of his high reputation. 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 faint 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, but he meant to find out before the day was passed.

"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 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, Henson made a fair tea, and 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 can leave him now," Bell said, with deep sarcasm. "We need have no further anxiety. Perfect rest is all that he requires."

Henson nodded in a sleepy fashion; his eyes were closed now till the others had left the room. Once he was alone 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."

CHAPTER LII.

Putting the Light Out.

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

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

The patient came at length. Everything was ready. Van Sneck 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 me who has coolness and courage. Oh, here is the spot. Feel the depression of the skull, Heritage. That is where the pressure lies, and no larger than a pea."

Heritage 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 Sneck's body.

"Beautiful, beautiful," Heritage murmured. "How easily it comes away."

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

"Don't be a fool," Bell said, sternly. "It's a mere matter of current." Heritage 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 out from Bell's lips as the light flickered again and popped out suddenly, leaving the whole room in intense darkness. Heritage cried aloud. David felt 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 Sneck would have gone. Heritage, Heritage, 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 lights were out 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 later and he was dragging the long spare flex from the impromptu operating-room to the swinging cord over the hall lamp. With a knife he cut the cord loose, he stripped the copper wires beneath, and rapidly joined one flex to the other.

"It's amateur work, but I fancy it will do," he muttered. "Anyway, that rascal is powerless to interfere with the circuit that controls the hall light."

Snap went the hall switch—there was a sudden cry from Heritage as the big lamp over the head of Van Sneck flared up again. Bell raced into the study and shut the door.

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

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

"No," he said, firmly, 'I'll do it. It was a cruel, dastardly trick to play upon me, 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 Heritage at work with stern approval. Nothing could have been more scientific, more skilful. It seemed a long time to David, looking on, but it was a mere matter of minutes.

"Finished," Heritage said, with a triumphant thrill. "And successful."

"And another second would have seen an end of our man," Bell said. "He's coming round again. Get those bandages on, Heritage. I'll look after the mess. Give him the drug. I want him to sleep for a good long time."

"Will he be sensible tomorrow," David asked.

"I'll pledge my reputation upon it," Bell said. "Hadn't you bcter telephone down to your electrician to come and see to those lights? I see the fuse in the meter is intact; it is only on the one circuit that they have gone."

Van Sneck opened his eyes and stared languidly about him. In a clear, weak, yet wholly sensible voice he asked where he was, and then lapsed into slumber. A little later and he lay snug and still in bed. There was a look of the deepest pleasure in the eyes of Heritage.

"I've saved him and he's saved me," he said. "But it was touch and go for both of us when the light failed. But for Bell I fancied that I should have fainted. And then it came to me that it was some trick, and my nerve returned."

"Never to leave you again," Bell said. "It tried you high, and found you not wanting."

"Heaven be praised," Heritage murmured. "But how was it done?"

Bell's face was stern as he took the kitchen candlestick from the table and went in the direction of the dining-room.

"Come with me, and I'll explain," he said, curtly.

The dining room was in a pitchy darkness, for the lights there had been on the short circuit; indeed, the lights on the ground floor had all failed with the exception of the hall, which fortunately had been on another circuit. The fact had saved Van Sneck's life, for if Bell had not speedily used that one live wire the patient must have perished.

Henson looked up from his sofa with a start and a smile.

"I am afraid I must have been asleep," he said, languidly.

"Liar," Bell thundered. "You have been plotting murder. And but for a mere accident the plot would have been successful. You have worked out the whole thing in your mind; you came here on purpose. You came here to stifle the light at the very moment when we were operating on Van Sneck. You thought that all the lights on the floor would be on the same circuit; you have been here before."

"Are you mad?" Henson gasped. "When have I been here before——"

"The night that you lured Van Sneck here by a forged letter and left him for dead."

Henson gasped, his lips moved, but no words came from them.

"You have a little knowledge of electricity," Bell went on. "And you saw your way pretty clear to spoil our operation tonight. You got that idea from yonder wall-plug, into which goes the plunger of the reading lamp on the cabinet yonder. At the critical moment all you had to do was to dip your fingers in water and press the tips of them against the live wire in the wall-plug. You did so, and immediately the wires fired all over the circuit and plunged us in darkness. But the hall light remained sound, and Van Sneck was saved. If it is any consolation to you, he will be as sensible as any of us tomorrow."

Henson had risen to his feet, pale and trembling. He protested, but it was all in vain. Bell approached the china wall-plug and pointed to it.

"Hold the candle down," he said. "There! You can see that the surface is still wet, there is water in the holes now, and some of it has trickled down the distemper on the wall. You ought to be shot where you stand, murderous dog."

Henson protested, with some dignity. It was all so much Greek to him, he said. He had been sleeping so quietly that he had not seen the light fail. Bell cut him short.

"Get out," he cried. "Go away; you poison the air that honest men breathe, and you are as fit and well as I am. Why don't you pitch him into the street, Steel? Why don't you telephone to Marley at the police station, and say that the Huddersfield swindler is here? Oh, if you only knew what an effort it is to keep my hands off him!"

Henson made for the door with alacrity. A moment later and he was in the street, dazed, confused and baffled, and with the conviction strong upon him that he had failed in his great coup. Van Sneck would be sensible tomorrow—he would speak. And then——

But he dared not think of that at present. He wanted all his nerve and courage now. He had just one last chance, one single opportunity of making money, and then he must get out of the country without delay. He almost wished now that he had not been quite so precipitate in the matter of James Merritt. That humble tool might have been of great advantage to him at this moment. But Merritt had threatened to be troublesome and must be got out of the way. But, then, the police had not picked Merritt up yet. Was it possible that Merritt had found out that——

But Henson did not care to think of that, either. He would go back to the quiet lodgings he had taken in Kemp Town for a day or two, he would change his clothes and walk over to Longdean Grange, and it would go hard if he failed to get a cheque from the misguided lady there. If he were 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 newcomer, opened his eyes. And those eyes were gleaming with a glow that filled Henson's heart with horrible dread. It was Merritt who sat opposite him, and it was Merrit whose eyes told Henson that he knew of the latter's black treachery. Henson 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 Merritt after him. The start was not long, but it was sufficient. Merritt took the wrong turn, and, with a heart beating fast and hard, Henson climbed upwards. It was a long time before his courage came back to him. He did not feel really easy in his mind until he had passed the lodge-gates at Longdean Grange, where he was fortunate enough, after a call or two, to rouse up Williams.

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," Henson cried. "Take me up to the house, and don't let anybody know I am here. Your mistress gone to bed?"

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

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

"Our dear nephew," said a cool, sarcastic voice. "Come in, sir, come in. This is quite charming. Well, my sweet philanthropist and most engaging gentleman, and what may we have the pleasure of doing for you tonight?"

"Lord Littimer?" Henson gasped. "Lord Littimer here?"

CHAPTER LIII.

Unsealed Lips.

Bell gave a gesture of relief as the door closed upon Henson. Heritage looked like a man who does not quite understand.

"I haven't quite got the hang of it yet," he said. "Was that done for my benefit?"

"Of course it was," Bell replied. "Henson found out that Van Sneck was here, as he was certain to do sooner or later. He comes here to make inquiries and finds you; also he comes to spy out the land. Now, without being much of a gambler, I'm willing to stake a large sum that he introduced the subject of your old trouble?"

"He invariably did that," Heritage admitted.

"Naturally. That was part of the game. And you told him that you had got over your illness and that you were going to do the operation. And you told him how. Where were you when the little conversation between Henson and yourself took place?"

"He was asked into the dining-room."

"And then you told him everything. Directly Henson's eyes fell upon that wall-plug he knew how to act. He made up his mind that the electric light should fail at a critical moment. Hence the dramatic 'accident' with the cycle. Once Henson had got into the house the rest was easy. He had only to wet his fingers and press them hard against the two wires in the wall plug and out pops the light, in consequence of the fuses blowing out. I don't know where Henson learnt the trick, but I do know that I was a fool not to think of it. You see the hall light being dropped through from the floor above was on the other circuit. If it hadn't been we should have had our trouble with Van Sneck for nothing."

"He would have died?" David asked.

The two doctors nodded significantly.

"What a poisonous scoundrel he is!" David cried. "Miss Chris Henson does not hesitate to say that he was more or less instrumental in removing two people who helped her and her sister to defeat Henson, and now he makes two attacks on Van Sneck's life. Really, we ought to inform the police what has happened and have him arrested before he can do any further mischief. Penal servitude for life would about fit the case."

Van Sneck was jealously guarded by Heritage and Bell for the next few hours. He awoke the next morning little the worse for the operation. His eyes were clear now; the restless, eager look had gone from them.

"Where am I?" he demanded. "What has happened?"

Bell explained briefly. As he spoke his anxiety passed away. He saw that Van Sneck was following quite intelligently and rationally.

"I remember coming here," the Dutchman said. "I can't recall the rest just now. I feel like a man who is trying to piece the fragments of a dream together."

"You'll have it all right in an hour or two," Bell said, with an encouraging smile. "Meanwhile your breakfast is ready. Yes, you can smoke afterwards if you like. And then you shall tell me all about Reginald Henson. As a matter of fact, we know all about it now."

"Oh," Van Sneck said, blankly. "You do, eh?"

"Yes, even to the history of the second Rembrandt, and the reason why Henson stabbed you and gave you that crack over the head. If you tell me the truth you are safe; if you don't—why, you stand a chance of joining Henson in the dock."

Bell went off, leaving Van Sneck to digest this speech at his leisure. Van Sneck lay back on his bed, propped up with pillows, and smoked many cigarettes before he expressed a desire to see Bell again. The latter came in with Steel; Heritage had gone elsewhere.

"This gentleman is Mr. Steel?" Van Sneck suggested.

Bell responded somewhat drily that it was. "But I see you are going to tell us everything," he went on. "That being so, suppose you begin at the beginning. When you sold that copy of the 'Crimson Blind' to Lord Littimer had you the other copy?"

"Ach, you have got to the bottom of things, it seems," Van Sneck gurgled.

"Yes, and I have saved your life, foolish as it might seem." Bell replied. "You came very near to losing it the second attempt last night at Henson's hands. Henson is done for, played out, burst up. We can arrest him on a half-dozen charges when we please. We can have you arrested any time on a charge of conspiracy over those pictures——"

"Of which I am innocent; I swear it," Van Sneck said, solemnly. "Those two Rembrandts—they fell into my hands by what you call a slice of good luck. I am working hand in glove with Henson at the time, and show him them. I suggest Lord Littimer as a purchaser. He would, perhaps, buy the two, which would be a little fortune for me. Then Henson, he says, "Don't you be a fool, Van Sneck. Suppress the other; say nothing about it. You get as much from Littimer for the one as you get for the two, because Lord Littimer think it unique."

"That idea commended itself to a curio dealer?" Bell suggested, drily.

"But yes," Van Sneck said, eagerly. "Later on we disclose the other and get a second big price. And Lord Littimer he buy those pictures?"

"No," Van Sneck said, indignantly. "They came to me in the way of honest business—a poor workman who knows nothing of their value, and takes fifteen marks for them."

"Honest merchant," David murmured. "Pray go on."

"I had to go away. Some youthful foolishness over some garnets raked up after many years. The police came down upon me so suddenly that I got away with the skin of my teeth. I leave the other Rembrandt, everything, behind me. I do not know that Henson he give me away so that he can steal the other Rembrandt."

"So you have found that out?" said Bell. "Who told you?"

"I learn that not so long ago. I learn it from a scoundrel called Merritt, a tool of Henson. He tells me to go to Littimer Castle to steal the Rembrandt for Henson, because Dr. Bell, he find my Rembrandt. Then I what you call pump Merritt, and he tells me all about the supposed robbery at Amsterdam and what was found in the portmanteau of good Dr. Bell yonder. Then I go to Henson and tell him what I find out, and he laughs. Mind you, that was after I came here from Paris on business for Henson."

"About the time you bought that diamond-mounted cigar-case?" David asked, quietly.

Van Sneck nodded. He was evidently impressed by the knowledge possessed by his questioners.

"That's it," he said. "I buy it because Henson ask me to. Henson say he make it all right about the Rembrandt, and that if I do as I am told he give me £500. His money is to come on a certain day, but I pump and I pump, and I find that there is some game against Mr. Steel, who is a great novelist."

"That is very kind of you," David said, modestly.

"One against Miss Enid Henson," Van Sneck went on. "I met that young lady once and I liked her; therefore, I say I will be no party to getting her into trouble. And Henson says I am one big fool, and that he is only giving Mr. Steel a lesson in the art of minding his own business. So I ask no further questions, though I am a good bit puzzled. With the last bank notes I possess, I go to a place called Walen's and buy the cigar case that Henson's says I meet him and hand over the case and ask him for my money. Henson swears that he has no money at all, not even enough to repay me the price of the cigar-case. He has been disapointed. And I have been drinking. So I swear I will write and ask Mr. Steel to see me, and I do so."

"And you get an answer?" David asked.

"Sir, I do. You said you would see me the same night. It was a forgery?"

"It was. Henson had anticipated something like that. I know all about the forgery, how my notepaper was procured, and when the forgery was written. But that has very little to do with the story now. Please go on."

Van Sneck paused before he proceeded.

"I am not quite sober," he said. 'I am hot with what I called my wrongs. I come here and ring the bell. The hall was in darkness. There was a light in the conservatory, but none in the study. I quite believed that it was Mr. Steel who opened the door and motioned me towards the study. Then the door of the study closed and locked behind me, and the electric light shot up. When I turned round I found myself face to face with Henson."

Van Sneck paused again and shuddered at some hideous recollection. His eyes were dark and eager; there was a warm moisture like varnish on his face.

"Even that discovery did not quite sober me," he went on. "I fancied it was some joke, or that perhaps I had got into the wrong house. But no, it was the room of a literary gentleman. I—I expected to see Mr. Steel come in or to try the door. Henson smiled at me. Such a smile! He asked me if I had the receipt for the cigar-case about me, and I said it was in my pocket. Then he smiled again, and something told me my life was in danger.

"I was getting pretty sober by that time. It came to me that I had been lured there; that Henson had got into the house during the absence of the owner. It was late at night in a quiet house, and nobody had seen me come. If that man liked to kill me he could do so and walk out of the house without the faintest chance of discovery. And he was twice my size, and a man without feeling. I looked round me furtively for a weapon.

"He saw my glance and understood it, and smiled again. I was trembling from head to foot now with a vague, nameless terror. From the very first I knew that I had not the smallest chance. Henson approached me and laid his hand on my shoulder. He wanted something, he gave that something a name. If I passed that something over to him I was free, if not—

"Well, gentlemen, I didn't believe him. He had made a discovery that frightened me. And I had what he wanted in my pocket. If I had handed it over to him he would not have spared me. As he approached me my foot slipped and I stumbled into the conservatory. I fell backwards. And then I recovered myself and defied Henson.

"'Fool,' he hissed, 'do you want to die?'"

"But I knew taht I should die in any case. Even then I could smile to myself as I thought how I could baffle my foe. Once, twice, three times he repeated his demands, and each time I was obdurate. I knew that he would kill me in any case.

"He came with a snarl of rage; there was a knife in his hand. I hurled a flower-pot at his head and missed him. The next instant and he had me by the throat. I felt his knife between my shoulders, then a stunning blow on the head, and till I woke here today I cannot recollect a single thing."

Van Sneck paused and wiped his face, wet with the horror of the recollection. David Steel gave Bell a significant glance, and the latter nodded.

"Was the thing that Henson wanted a ring?" Steel asked, quietly.

CHAPTER LIV.

Where is the Ring?

Van Sneck looked up with some signs of confusion. He had not expected a question of that kind. There was just the suggestion of cunning on his face.

"A ring!" he murmured, vaguely. "A ring! What ring?"

"Now, look here," David said, sternly. "You are more or less in our power, you know, but we are not disposed to be hard on you so long as you are quite candid with us. Henson required something that he believed to be in your possession; indeed, you have as good as said you had it with you. Henson lured you into my house to get that more than anything else. That he would have killed you even after he got it, I firmly believe. But that is not the point. Now, was not Henson looking for Prince Rupert's ring that you got from him by means of a trick?"

Van Sneck dropped his hands helplessly on the bed.

"Gentlemen," he whined, "you are too much for me. The marvellous accuracy of your knowledge is absolutely overwhelming. It was the ring Henson was after."

"The one you stole from him years ago! But what did you know about it?"

Van Sneck smiled.

"There is no living man who knows more about those things than I do," he said. "It is a passion and a study with me. And some seven years ago, in Holland, Henson gave me the description of a ring he wanted me to copy. Henson never told me what the ring was called, but I knew it was the Prince Rupert ring. I made the copy, and Henson was pleased with it. Some time later he came to me with the original, and asked for another copy. I meant to be honest, but my love for those things got the better of me. I made him two copies: the one good, and the other an exact facsimile of the Prince Rupert. These I handed over to Henson, and he went away perfectly satisfied that he had a good copy and the original. I chuckled to myself, feeling pretty sure that he would never find out."

"But he did find out?" David said.

"Only lately. Probably he took it to an expert for valuation or perhaps for sale. Lately his idea was to offer the ring to Lord Littimer for a huge sum of money, but when he discovered he had been done he knew that Lord Littimer would not be so deceived. Also he had a pretty good idea that I should keep the ring about me. You see, I dared not sell an historic gem like that. And, as usual, Henson was perfectly right."

"Then you had the ring in your pocket the night you came here?" asked Steel, with a commendable effort at coolness.

"Did Henson get it?"

"No, he didn't," Van Sneck chuckled. "Come what might, I had made up my mind that he should never see that ring again. You see, I was frightened and confused, and I was not properly sober, and I did something with the ring, though to save my life I couldn't say what I did. Do you know, Dr. Bell, I have lost my sense of smell?"

Steel wriggled impatiently about on his chair. The interruption was exasperating. Bell, however, seemed to take a different view of the matter altogether.

"Quite naturally," he said. "The blow on your head held all your senses suspended for a time. After the operation I should not have been surprised to have found you half blind and stone deaf into the bargain. But one thing is certain—your smell will come back to you. It may remain in abeyance for a few days, it may return in a few moments."

"What on earth has this to do with our interview?" David asked.

"I fancy a great deal," Bell said. "The sense of smell has a great deal to do with memory. Doesn't the scent of flowers bring back vivid recollections of things sometimes for years forgotten? Van Sneck was going to say the air was heavy with the fragrance of some particular blossom when he was struck down by Henson in your conservatory."

"Very clever man, Dr. Bell," Van Sneck said, admiringly. "He seems to see right through your mind and out at the other side. To a great extent I recollect all that happened that eventful night. And just at the very last I seem to smell something powerful. That smell came to my nostrils just like a flash and then had gone again. Gentlemen, if I could have a good long scent at that flower I tell you what I did with that ring."

"Sounds rather complex," David said. "Not a bit of it," Bell retorted. "Our friend is talking sound common sense, and our friend is going to rest now late into the afternoon, when we'll put him into an armchair with some pillows and let him sit in the conservatory. Associating with familiar surroundings frequently works wonders. Van Sneck, you go to sleep."

Van Sneck closed his eyes obediently. He was somewhat tired with the interview. But, on the whole, Bell decided that he was doing very well indeed. And there was very little more to be done for the present. The two men smoked their cigars peacefully.

"We have got to the end," Bell said.

"I fancy so," David murmured. "But we can't save the scandal. I don't see how Reginald Henson is going to get out of the mess without a prosecution."

Any further speculation as to the future of that engaging rascal was cut short by a pleasant surprise, no other than the unexpected arrival of Ruth Gates and Chris Henson. The latter was beaming with health and happiness; she had discarded her disguise, and stood confessed before all the world like the beautiful creature that she was.

"What does it all mean?" David asked. "What will Longdean village say?"

"What does Longdean village know?" Chris retorted. "They are vaguely aware that somebody was taken away from the house a short time ago to be buried, but that is all their knowledge. And there is no more need for disguise, Lord Littimer says. He knows pretty well everything. He has been very restless and uneasy for the past day or two, and yesterday he left saying that he had business in London. Early today I had a characteristic telegram from him saying that he was at Longdean, and that I was necessary to his comfort there. I was to come clothed in my right mind, and I was to bring Mr. Steel and Dr. Bell along."

"It can't be managed," said Bell "We've got Van Sneck here."

"And I had forgotten all about him," said Chris. 'Was the operation successful?"

Bell told his budget of good news down to the story of the ring and the mysterious manner in which it had disappeared again. David had followed Ruth into the conservatory, where she stood with her dainty head buried over a rose.

She looked up with a warm, shy smile on her face.

"I hope your are satisfied," she said, "you are safe now?"

"I was never very much alarmed, dearest," Steel said. "If this thing had never happened I might never have met you. And as soon as this business is definitely settled I shall come and see your uncle. I am a very impatient man, Ruth."

"And you shall see my uncle when you please, dear," she said. "You will find him quite as charming as you say your mother is. What will she say?"

"Say? That you are the dearest and sweetest girl in the world, and that I am a lucky fellow. But you are not going off already?"

"Indeed, we must. We have a cab at the door. And I am going to brave the horrors of Longdean Grange and spend the night there. Only, I fancy that the horrors have gone for ever. I shall be very disappointed if you don't come to-morrow."

Behind a friendly palm David bent and kissed the shy lips, with a vow that he would see Longdean Grange on the morrow. Then Chris caught up Ruth with a whirl, and they were gone.

It was after ten that Bell and Steel managed to convey Van Sneck to the conservatory. The place was filled with brightness and scent and color and the afterglow of the sunshine. The artistic eye of the Dutchman lighted up with genuine pleasure.

"They say you islanders are crude and cold, and have no sense of the beautiful," he said. "But there are no houses anywhere to compare with those of the better-class Englishman. Look at those colors blending—"

"Hang those colors," said Bell, vigorously. "Steel, there is nothing like moisture to bring out the full fragrance of flowers. Turn on your hose and give your plants a good watering."

"It's the proper time," David laughed. "Turn on the tap for me."

A cooling stream played on the flowers; plants dropped their heads filled with the diamond moisture; the whole atmosphere was filled with the odor of moist earth. Then the air seemed laden with the mingled scent.

"I can smell the soil," Van Sneck cried. "How good it is to smell anything again! And I can just catch a suggestion of the perfume of something familiar. What's that red bloom?"

He pointed to a creeper growing up the wall. David broke off a spray.

(To be continued.)