POOR DOCUMENT

MC 2033

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 XLIV—(Continued.)

"Or the ring, either?" David Asked.

"Or the ring either. The same night Lady Littimer started after her boy. Littimer was going to have Frank prosecuted. Lady Littimer fled to Longdean Grange, where Frank joined her. Then my uncle turned up, and there was a scene. It is said that Lord Littimer struck his wife, but Frank says that she fell against his gesticulating fist. Anyway, it was the same as a blow, and Lady Littimer dropped on the floor, dragging a table down with her, flowers and china and all. You have seen that table in Longdean Grange. Since then it has never been touched, the place has never been swept or dusted or garnished. You have seen my aunt, and you know what the shock has done for her—the shock and the steady persecutions of Reginald Henson."

"Who seems to be at the bottom of the whole trouble," said David. "But do you think that was the real ring on the poor girl's finger?"

"I don't. I fancy Henson had a copy made for emergencies. It was he who sent the copy to Claire, and it was the copy that Littimer saw on her hand. You see, directly Frank broke open that safe, Henson, who was at the castle at the time, saw his opportunity—he could easily scheme some way of making use of it. If that plot against Frank had failed he would have invented another. And the unexpected suicide of Claire Carfax played into his hands. Henson has that ring somewhere, and it will be our task to find it."

"And when we have done so?"

"Give it to Lord Littimer and tell him where we found it. And then we shall be rid of one of the most pestilential rascals the world has ever seen. When you get back to Brighton I want you to tell this story to Hatherly Bell."

"I will," David replied. "What a weird, fascinating story it is! And the sooner I am back the better I shall be pleased. I wonder if our man is awake yet. If you will excuse me, I will go and see. Ah!"

There was the sound of somebody moving overhead.

CHAPTER XLV.

On the Trail.

At the same moment Williams came softly in. There was a grin of satisfaction on his face.

"The brute is fast asleep," he said. "I've just been in his room. He left the lamp burning, and there is a lump on the side of his head as big as an ostrich egg. But he didn't mean to go to sleep; he hasn't taken any of his clothes off. On the whole, sir, wouldn't it be better for you to wake our man up and get him away?"

David was of the same opinion. Van Sneck was lying on the bed looking vacantly about him. He seemed older and more worn, perhaps, because his beard and moustache were growing ragged and dirty on his face. He pressed his hand to his head in a confused kind of way.

"I tell you I can't find it," he said; "the thing slipped out of my hand—a small thing like that easily might. What's the good of making a fuss about a ring not worth £20? Search my pockets if you like. What a murderous-looking dog you are when you're out of temper!"

All this in a vague, rambling way, in a slightly foreign accent. David touched him on the shoulder.

"Won't you come back with me to Brighton?" he said.

"Certainly," was the ready response; "you look a good sort of chap. I'll go anywhere you please. Not of Littimer. If Henson has the real that I've got a penny of money left. What a spree it has been. Who are you?"

"My name is Steel. I am David Steel, the novelist."

A peculiarly cunning look came over Van Sneck's face.

"I got your letter," he said. "And I came. It was after I had had that row with Henson. Henson is a bigger scoundrel than I am, though you may not think it."

"I accept your statement implicitly," David said, drily.

"Well, he is. And I got your letter. And I called. . . . And you nearly killed me. And I dropped it down in the corner of the conservatory."

"Dropped what?" David asked, sharply.

"Nothing," said Van Sneck. "What do you mean by talking about dropping things. I never dropped anything in my life. I make others do that, eh, eh! But I can't remember anything. It just comes back to me, and then there is a wheel goes round in my head. . . . Who are you?"

David gave up the matter as hopeless. This was emphatically a case for Bell. Once let him get Van Sneck back to Brighton and Bell could do the rest.

"We'd better go," he said to Enid. "We are merely wasting time here."

"I suppose so," Enid said, thoughtfully. "All the same, I should greatly like to know what it is that our friend Van Sneck dropped."

It was a long and tedious journey back to Brighton again, for the patient seemed to tire easily, and he evinced a marked predilection for sitting by the roadside and singing. It was very late before David reached his house. Bell beamed his satisfaction. Van Sneck, with a half-gleam of recognition of his surroundings, and with a statement that he had been there before, lapsed into silence. Bell produced a small phial in a chemist's wrapper and poured the contents into a glass. With a curt command to drink he passed the glass over to Van Sneck.

The latter drank the small dose, and Bell carried him more or less to a ground-floor bedroom behind the dining-room. There he speedily undressed his patient and got him into bed. Van Sneck was practically fast asleep before his head had touched the pillow.

"I went out and got that dose with a view to eventualities," Bell explained. "I know pretty well what is the matter with Van Sneck, and I propose to operate upon him, with the help of Heritage. I've put him in my bed and locked the door. I shall sleep in the big armchair."

David flung himself into a big deck lounge and lighted a cigarette.

"My word, that has been a bit of business," he said. "Pour me out a little whisky in one of the long glasses and fill it up with soda. . . . Oh, that's better. I never felt so thirsty in my life. I got Van Sneck away without Henson having the slightest suspicion that he was there, and I had the satisfaction of giving Henson a smashing blow without his seeing me."

"Sounds like conjuring," Bell said, behind his cigar. "Explain yourself."

David went carefully into details. He told the story of Prince Rupert's ring to a listener who followed him with the most flattering attention.

"Of course, all this is new to me," Bell said, presently, "though I knew the family well up to that time. Depend upon it, Enid is right. Henson has got the ring. But how fortunately everything seems to have turned out for the scoundrel."

"If a man likes to be an unscrupulous blackguard he can make use of all events," David said. "But even Henson is not quite so clever as we take him to be. He has found out the trick we played upon him over Chris Henson, but he hasn't the faintest idea that all this time he has been living under the same roof at Littimer."

"The girl is a wonderful actress," Bell replied. "I only guessed who she was. If I hadn't known as much as I do she would have deceived me. But Henson has shot his bolt. After we have operated upon Van Sneck we shall be pretty near the truth. It is a great pull to have him in the house."

"And a nasty thing for Henson——"

"Who will find out before tomorrow is over. I feel pretty sure that this house is watched carefully. Any firm of private detectives would do that, and they need be told nothing either. I know that I was followed when I went to the chemist's to fetch that dose for our friend yonder. Still, it is a sign that Henson is getting frightened."

"Why do you bring Heritage into this matter?" David asked.

"Well, for a variety of reasons. First of all, Heritage is an old friend of mine, and I take a great interest in his case. I am going to give him a chance to recover his lost confidence, and he is a splendid operator. Besides, I want to know why Henson has gone out of his way to be so kind to Heritage. And finally, Heritage was the family doctor of the Carfax people you just mentioned before he went to practice in London. Let me once get Heritage round again, and I shall be greatly disappointed if he does not give us a good deal of valuable information regarding Reginald Henson."

"And Cross. What about him?"

"Oh, Cross will do as I ask him. Without egotism, he knows that the case is perfectly safe in my hands. And if we care to look after Van Sneck, why, there will be one the less burden in the hospital. What a funny business it is! Van Sneck gets nearly done to death under this roof, and he comes back here to be cured again."

David yawned sleepily as he rose.

"Well, I've had enough of it for tonight," he said. "I'm dog-tried, and I must confess to feeling sick of the Hensons and Littimers, and all their works."

"Including their friend, Miss Ruth Gates?" Bell said, slily. "Still, they have made pretty good use of you, and I expect you will be glad to get back to your work again. At the same time, you need not trouble your head for plots for many a day."

David admitted that the situation had its compensations, and went off to bed. Bell met him the next day as fresh as if he had had a full night's rest, and vouchsafed the information that the patient was as well as possible. He was cold and no longer feverish.

"In fact, he is ready for the operation at any time," he said. "I shall get Heritage here to dinner, and we shall operate afterwards with electric light. It will be a good steadier for Heritage's nerves, and the electric light is the best light of all for this business. If you have got a few yards of spare flex from your reading-lamp I'll rig the thing up without troubling your electrician. I can attach it to your study lamp."

"I've got what you want," David said. "Now come in to breakfast."

There was a pile of letters on the table, and on the top a telegram. It was a long message, and Bell watched Steel's face curiously.

"From Littimer Castle," he suggested. "Am I right?"

"As usual," David cried. "My little scheme over that diamond star has worked magnificently. Miss Chris tells me that she has—by Jove, Bell, just listen—she has solved the problem of the cigar-case; she has found out the whole thing. She wants me to meet her in London tomorrow, when she will tell me everything."

CHAPTER XLVI.

Littimer's Eyes Are Opened.

Lord Littimer sat on the terrace, shaded from the sun by an awning over his deck-chair. From his expression he seemed to be at peace with all the world. His brown, eager face had lost its usually keen, suspicious look; he smoked a cigarette lazily. Chris sat opposite him looking as little like a hard-working secretary as possible.

As a matter of fact, there was nothing for her to do. Littimer had already tired of his lady secretary idea, and had Chris not interested and amused him he would have found some means to get rid of her before now.

But she did interest and amuse and puzzle him. There was something charmingly reminiscent about the girl. She was like somebody he had once known and cared for, but for the life of him he could not think who. And when curiosity sometimes got the better of good breeding Chris would baffle him in the most engaging manner.

"Really, you are an exceedingly clever girl," he said.

"In fact, we are both exceedingly clever," Chris replied, cooly. "And yet nobody is ever quite so clever as he imagines himself to be. Do you ever make bad mistakes, Lord Littimer?"

"Sometimes," Littimer said, with a touch of cynical humor. "For instance, I married some years ago. That was bad. Then I had a son, which was worse."

"At one time you were fond of your family?"

"Well, upon my word, you are the only creature I ever met who has had the audacity to ask me that question. Yes, I was very fond of my wife and my son, and, God help me, I am fond of them still. I don't know why I talk to you like this."

"I do," Chris said, gently. "It is because unconsciously you yearn for sympathy. And you fancy you are in no way to blame; you imagine that you acted in the only way consistent with your position and dignity. You fancied that your son was a vulgar thief. And I am under the impression that Lady Littimer had money."

"She had a large fortune," Littimer said, faintly. "Miss Lee, do you know that I have a great mind to box your ears?"

Chris laughed unsteadily. She was horribly frightened, though she did not show it. She had been waiting for days to catch Littimer in this mood. And she did not feel disposed to go back now. The task must be accomplished some time.

"Lady Littimer was very rich," she went on, "and she was devoted to Frank, your son. Now, if he had wanted a large sum of money very badly, and had gone to his mother, she would have given it to him without the slightest hesitation?"

"What fond mother wouldn't?"

"I am obliged to you for conceding the point. Your son wanted money, and he robbed you when he could have had anything for the asking from his mother."

"Sounds logical," Littimer said, flippantly. "Who had the money?"

"The same man who stole Prince Rupert's ring—Reginald Henson."

Littimer dropped his cigarette and sat upright in his chair. He was keen and alert enough now. There were traces of agitation on his face.

"That is a serious accusation," he said.

"Not more serious than your accusation against your son," Chris retorted.

"Well, perhaps not," Littimer admitted. "But why do you take up Frank's cause in this way? Is there any romance budding under my unconscious eyes?"

"Now you are talking nonsense," Chris said, with just a touch of color in her cheeks. "I say, and I am going to prove when the time comes, that Reginald Henson was the thief. I am sorry to pain you, but is absolutely necessary to go into these matters. When those foolish letters, written by a foolish girl, fell into your hands, your son vowed that he would get them back, by force if necessary. He made that rash speech in hearing of Reginald Henson. Henson probably lurked about until he saw the robbery committed. Then it occurred to him that he might do a little robbery on his own account, seeing that your son would get the credit of it. The safe was open, and so he walked off with your ring and your money."

"My dear young lady, this is all mere surmise."

"So you imagine. At that time Reginald Henson had a kind of home which he was running at 218, Brunswick Square, Brighton. Lady Littimer had just relinquished a similar undertaking there. Previously Reginald Henson had a home at Huddersfield. Mind you, he didn't run either in his own name, and he kept studiously in the background. But he was desperately hard up at the time in consequence of his dissipation and extravagance, and the money he collected for his home went into his own pocket. Then the police got wind of the matter, and Reginald Henson discretely disappeared from Brighton just in time to save himself from arrest for frauds there and at Huddersfield. A member of the Huddersfield police is in a high position at Brighton. He has recognized Reginald Henson as the man who was 'wanted' at Huddersfield. I don't know if there will be a prosecution after all these years, but there you are."

"You are speaking from authority?"

"Certainly I am. Reginald Henson, as such, is not known to Inspector Marley, but I sent the latter a photograph of Henson, and he returned it this morning with a letter to the effect that it was the man the Huddersfield police were looking for."

"What an interesting girl you are," Littimer murmured. "Always so full of surprises. Our dear Reginald is even a greater rascal than I took him for."

"Well, he took your money, and that saved him. He took your ring, a facsimile of which he had made before for some ingenious purpose. It came with a vengeance. Then Claire Carfax committed suicide, thanks to your indiscretion and folly."

"Go on. Rub it in. Never mind about my feelings."

"I'm not minding," Chris said coolly. "Henson saw his game and played it boldly. I could not have told you all this yesterday, but a letter I had this morning cleared the ground wonderfully. Henson wanted to cause family differences, and he succeeded. Previously he got Dr. Bell out of the way by means of the second Rembrandt. You can't deny there is a second Rembrandt now, seeing that it is locked up in your safe. And where do you think Bell found it? Why, at 218, Brunswick Square, Brighton, where Henson had to leave it seven years ago, when the police were so hot upon his trail. He was fearful lest you and Bell should come together again, and that is why he came here at night to steal your Rembrandt. And yet you trusted that man blindly all the time your own son was suffering on mere suspicions. How blind you have been!"

"I blind still," Littimer said, curtly. "My dear young lady, I admit that you are making out a pretty strong case; indeed, I might go farther, and say that you have all my sympathy. But what you say would not be taken as evidence in a court of law. If you produce that ring, for instance—but that is at the bottom of the North Sea."

Chris took a small cardboard box from her pocket, and from thence produced a ring. It was a ruby ring with black pearls on either side, and had some inscription inside.

"Look at that," she said. "It was sent to me today by my—by a friend of mine. It is the ring which Reginald Henson shows to Lady Littimer when he wants money from her. It was lost by Heason a night or two ago, and it fell into the hands of someone who is interested, like myself, in the exposure and disgrace of Reginald Henson."

Littimer examined the ring carefully.

"It is a wonderfully good immitation," he said, presently.

"So I am told," said Chris. "So good that it must have actually been copied from the original. Now, how could Henson have had a copy made unless he possessed the original? Will you be good enough to answer me that question, Lord Littimer?"

Littimer could do no more than gaze at the ring in his hand for some time.

"I could have sworn—indeed, I am ready to swear—that the real ring was never in anybody's possession but mine from the day that Frank was a year old till it disappeared. Of course, scores of people had looked at it, Henson amongst the rest. But how did Claire Carfax——"

"Easily enough. Henson had a first copy made from a description. I don't know why; probably we shall never know why. Probably he had it done when he knew that your son and Miss Carfax had struck up a flirtation. It was he who forged a letter from Frank to Miss Carfax, enclosing the ring. By that means he hoped to create mischief which, if it had been nipped in the bud, could never have been traced to him. As matters turned out he succeeded beyond his wildest expectations. He had got the real ring, too, which was likely to prove a very useful thing in case he ever wanted to make terms. A second and faithful copy was made—the copy you held in your hand—to hold temptingly over Lady Littimer's head when he wanted large sums of money from her."

"The scoundrel! He gets the money, of course?"

"He does. To my certain knowledge he has had nearly £70,000. But the case is in good hands. You have only to wait a few days longer and the man will be exposed. Already, as you see, I have wound his accomplice, the Reverend James Merritt, round my finger. Of course, the idea of getting up a bazaar has all been nonsense. I am only waiting for a little further information, and then Merritt will feel the iron hand under the velvet glove. Unless I am greatly mistaken, Merritt can tell us where Prince Rupert's ring is. Already Van Sneck is in our grasp."

"Van Sneck! Is he in England?"

"He is. Did you read that strange case of a man being found half-murdered in the conservatory of Mr. Steel, the novelist, in Brighton? Well, that was Van Sneck. But I can't tell you any more at present. You must wait and be content."

"Tell me one thing, and I will wait as long as you like. Who are you?"

Chris shook her head, merrily. A great relief had been taken off her mind. She had approached a delicate and difficult matter, and she had succeeded beyond her expectations. That she had shaken the man opposite her sorely was evident from his face. The hardness had gone from his eyes, his lips were no longer bitter and cynical.

"I may have been guilty of a great wrong," he murmured. "All these years I may have been living under a misapprehension. And you have told me what I should never have suspected, although I have never had a high opinion of my dear Reginald. Where is my wife now?"

"She is still at Longdean Grange. You will notice a great change in her, a great and sorrowful change. But it is not too late to——"

Littimer rose and went swiftly towards the house. At any other time the action would have been rude, but Chris fully understood. She had touched the man to the bottom of his soul, and he was anxious to hide his emotion.

"Poor man," Chris murmured. "His hard cynicism conceals a deal of suffering. But the suffering is past; we have only to wait patiently for daylight now."

Chris rose restlessly in her turn and strolled along the terrace to her favorite spot looking over the cliffs. There was nobody about; it was very hot there. The girl removed her glasses and pushed back the banded hair from her forehead. She had drawn a photograph from her pocket which she was regarding intently. She was quite heedless of the fact that somebody was coming along the cliffs toward her. She raised the photograph to her lips and kissed it tenderly.

"Poor Frank," she murmured. "Poor fellow, so weak and amiable. And yet with all your faults—"

Chris paused, and a little cry escaped her lips. Frank Littimer, looking very wild and haggard, stood before her.

"I beg your pardon," he began. "I came to see you because—"

The words died away. He staggered back, pale as the foam beating on the rocks below, his hand clutching at his left side as if there was some mortal pain there.

"Chris," he murmured. "Chris, Chris, Chris! And they told me—"

He could say no more, he could only stand there trembling from head to foot, fearful lest his mocking senses were making sport of him. Surely, it was some beautiful vision he had come upon. With one unsteady hand he touched the girl's sleeve; he pressed her warm red cheeks with his fingers, and with that touch his manhood came back to him.

"Darling," he whispered, eagerly. "Dearest, what does it mean?"

Chris stood there, smiling rosily. She had not meant to betray herself; fate had done that for her, and she was not sorry. It was a cruel trick they had played upon Frank, but it had been necessary. Chris held out her hand with a loving little gesture.

"Are you not going to kiss me, dear?" she asked, sweetly.

Frank Littimer needed no further invitation. It was quiet and secluded there, and nobody could possibly see them. With a little sigh Chris felt her lover's arms about her and his kisses warm on her lips. The clever, brilliant girl had disappeared; a pretty, timid creature stood in her place for the time. For the moment Frank Littimer could do no more than gaze into her eyes with rapture and amazement. There was plenty of time for explanations.

"Let us go into the arbour," Frank suggested. "No I am not going to release your hand for a moment. If I do you will fly away again. Chris, dear Chris, why did you serve me so?"

"It was absolutely necessary," Chris replied. "It was necessary to deceive Reginald Henson. But it was hard work the other night."

"You mean when I came here and—"

"Tried to steal the Rembrandt. Oh, you needn't explain. I know that you had to come. And we have Henson in our power at last."

"I am afraid that is too good to be true. But tell me everything from the beginning. I am as dazed and confused as a tired man roused out of a sound sleep."

Chris proseeded to explain from the beginning of all things. It was an exceedingly interesting and exciting narrative to Frank Littimer, and he followed it carefully. He would have remained there all day listening to the music of Chris' voice and looking into her eyes. He had come there miserable and downcast to ask a question, and behold he had suddenly found all the joy and sweetness of existence.

"And so you have accomplished all this?" he said, at length. "What a glorious adventure it must have been, and how clever you are! So is Mr. David Steel. Many a time I have tried to break through the shackles, but Reginald has always been too strong for me."

"Well, he's shot his bolt, now," Chris smiled. "I have just been opening your father's eyes."

Frank laughed as he had not laughed for a long time.

"Do you mean to say he doesn't know who you are?" he asked.

"My dear boy, he hasn't the faintest idea. Neither had you the faintest idea when I made you a pair of spectacles the other night. But he will know soon."

"And great shame he may," Frank said, fervently.

He leant over and pressed his lips passionately to those of Chris. When he looked up again Lord Littimer was standing before the arbor, wearing his most cynical expression.

"He does know," he said. "My dear young lady, you need not move. The expression of sweet confusion on your face is infinitely pleasing. I did not imagine that one so perfectly self-possessed could look like that. It gives me quite a nice sense of superiority. And you, sir?"

The last words were uttered a little sternly. Frank had risen. His face was pale, his manner resolute and respectful.

"I came here to ask Miss Lee a question, sir, not knowing, of course, who she was."

"And she betrayed herself, eh?"

"I am sorry if I have done so," Chris said, "but I should not have done so unless I had been taken by surprise. It was so hot that I had taken off my glasses and put my hair up. Then Frank came up and surprised me."

"You have grown an exceedingly pretty girl, Chris," Littimer said, critically. "Of course, I recognize you now. You are nicer-looking than Miss Lee."

Chris put on her glasses and rolled her hair down resolutely.

"You will be good enough to understand that I am going to continue Miss Lee for the present," she said. "My task is a long way from being finished yet. Lord Littimer, you are not going to send Frank away?"

Littimer looked undecided.

"I don't know," he said. "Frank, I have heard a great deal today to cause me to think that I might have done you a grave injustice. And yet I am not sure. . . . In any case, it would be bad policy for you to remain here. If the news came to the ears of Reginald Henson it might upset Miss Machiavelli's plans."

"That had not occurred to me for the moment," Chris exclaimed. "On the whole Frank had better not stay. But I should dearly like to see you two shake hands."

Frank Littimer made an involuntary gesture, and then he drew back.

"I'd—I'd rather not," he said. "At least, not until my character has been fully vindicated. Heavens knows I have suffered enough for a boyish indiscretion."

"And you have youth on your side," Littimer said gravely. "Whereas I—"

"I know, I know. It has been terrible all round. I took those letters of poor Claire's away because they were sacred property, and for no eye but mine—"

"No eye but yours saw them. I was going to send them back again. I wish I had."

"Aye, so do I. I took them and destroyed them. But I take Heaven to witness that I touched nothing else besides. If it was the last word I ever uttered—what is that fellow doing here in that garb? It is one of Henson's most disreputable tools."

Merritt was coming across the terrace. He paused suspiciously as he caught sight of Frank, but Chris, with a friendly wave of her hand, encouraged him to come on.

"It is all part of the game," she said. "I sent for our friend Merritt, but when I did so I had no idea that Frank would be present. Since you are here you might just as well stay and hear a little more of the strange doings of Reginald Henson. The time has come to let Merritt know that I am not the clever lady burglar he takes me for."

Merritt came up doggedly. Evidently the presence of Frank Littimer disturbed him. Chris motioned him to a seat, quite gaily.

"You are very punctual," she said. "I told you I wanted you to give Lord Littimer and myself a little advice and assistance. In the first place we want to know where that gun-metal diamond-mounted cigar-case, at present for sale in Rutter's window, came from. We want to know how it got there and who sold it to Rutter's people. Also we want to know why Van Sneck purchased a similar cigar-case from Walen's, of Brighton."

Merritt's heavy jaw dropped, his face turned a dull yellow. He looked round helplessly for some means of escape, and then relinquished the idea with a sigh.

"Done," he said. "Clear done. And by a woman too! A smart woman, I admit, but a woman all the same. And yet why didn't you——"

Merritt paused, lost in the contemplation of a problem beyond his intellectual strength.

"You have nothing to fear," Chris said, with a smile. "Tell us all you know and conceal nothing, and you will be free when we have done with you."

Merritt wiped his dry lips with the back of his hand.

"I come peaceable," he said, hoarsely. "And I'm going to tell you all about it."

CHAPTER XLVII.

The Track Broadens.

There was an uneasy grin on Merritt's face, a suggestion that he did not altogether trust those around him. Hard experience in the ways of the wicked had taught him the folly of putting his confidence in anyone. Just for the moment the impulse to shuffle was upon him.

"If I say nothing, then I can't do any harm," he remarked, sapiently. "Best, on the whole, for me to keep my tongue between my teeth."

"Mr. Henson is a dangerous man to cross," Chris suggested.

"He is that," Merritt agreed. "You don't know him as I do."

Chris conceded the point, though she had her own views on that matter. Lord Littimer had seated himself on the broad stone bench along the terrace, whence he was watching the scene with the greatest zest and interest.

"You imagine Mr. Henson to be a friend of yours?" Chris asked.

Merritt nodded and grinned. So long as he was useful to Henson he was fairly safe.

"Mr. Merritt," Chris asked, suddenly, "have you ever heard of Reuben Taylor?"

The effect of the question was electrical. Merritt's square jaw dropped with a click, there was fear in the furtive eyes that he cast around him.

"I read about Reuben Taylor in one of our very smart papers lately," Chris went on. "It appears that Mr. Taylor is a person who nobody seems to have seen, but who from time to time does a vast service to the community at large. He is not exactly a philanthropist, for he is well rewarded for his labors both by the police and his clients. Suppose Mr. Merritt here had done some wrong."

"A great effort of imagination," Littimer murmured, gently.

"Had done something wrong, and an enemy or quondam friend wants to 'put him away.' I believe that is the correct expression. In that case he does not go to the police himself, because he is usually of a modest and retiring disposition. No, he usually puts down a few particulars in the way of a letter and sends it to Reuben Taylor under cover at a certain address. Is not that quite correct, Mr. Merritt?"

"Right," Merritt said, hoarsely. "Some day we shall find out who Taylor is, and ——"

"Never mind that. Do you know that the night before your friend Mr. Henson left the Castle he placed in the post-bag a letter addressed to Mr. Reuben Taylor? In view of what I read recently in the paper alluded to the name struck me as strange. Now, Mr. Merritt, is it possible that letter had anything to do with you?"

Merritt did not appear to hear the question. His eyes were fixed on space; there was a sanguine clenching of his fists as if they had been about the throat of a foe.

"If I had him here," he murmured. "If I only had him here! He's given me away. After all that I have done for him he's given me away."

His listeners said nothing; they fully appreciated the situation. Merritt's presence at the Castle was both dangerous and hazardous for Henson.

"If you went away today you might be safe?" Chris suggested.

"Aye, I might," Merritt said, with a cunning grin in his eyes. "If I had a hundred pounds."

Chris glanced significantly at Littimer, who nodded and took up the parable.

"You shall have the money," he said. "And you shall go as soon as you have answered Miss Lee's questions."

Merritt proclaimed himself eager to say anything. But Merritt's information proved to be a great deal less than she had anticipated.

"I stole that picture," Merritt confessed. "I was brought down here on purpose. Henson sent to London and said he had a job for me. It was to get the picture from Dr. Bell. I didn't ask any questions, but set to work at once."

"Did you know what the picture was?" Chris asked.

"Bless you, yes; it was a Rembrandt engraving. Why, it was I who in the first place stole the first Rembrandt from his lordship yonder, in Amsterdam. I got into his lordship's sitting-room by climbing down a spout, and I took the picture."

"But the other belonged to Van Sneck," said Chris.

"It did; and Van Sneck had to leave Amsterdam hurriedly, being wanted by the police. Henson told me that Van Sneck had a second copy of 'The Crimson Blind,' and I had to burgle that as well; and I had to get into Dr. Bell's room and put the second copy in his portmanteau. Why? Ask somebody wiser than me. It was all some deep game of Henson's, only you may be pretty sure he didn't tell me what what the game was. I got my money and returned to London, and till pretty recently I saw no more of Henson."

"But you came into the game again," said Littimer.

"Quite lately, your lordship. I went down to Brighton. I was told as Bell had got hold of the second Rembrandt owing to Henson's carelessness, and that he was pretty certain to bring it here. He did bring it here, and I tried to stop him on the way, and he half killed me."

"Those half measures are so unsatisfactory," Littimer smiled.

Merritt grinned. He fully appreciated the humor of the remark.

"That attack and the way it was brought about were suggested by Henson," he went on. "If it failed, I was to come up to the Castle here without delay and tell Henson so. I came, and he covered my movements whilst I pinched the picture. I had been told that the thing was fastened to the wall, but a pair of steel pliers made no odds to that. I took the picture home, and two days later it vanished. And that's all I know about it."

"Lame and impotent conclusion!" said Littimer.

"Wait a moment," Chris cried. "You found the diamond star which you pawned——"

"At your request, miss. Don't go for to say as you've forgotten that."

"I have forgotten nothing," Chris said, with a smile. "I want to know about the cigar-case."

Merritt looked blankly at the speaker. Evidently this was strange ground to him.

"I don't know anything about that," he said. "What sort of a cigar-case?"

"Gun-metal set with diamonds. The same case or a similar one to that purchased by Van Sneck from Walen's in Brighton. Come, rack your brains a bit. Did you ever see anything of Van Sneck about the time of his accident?" You know where he is?"

"Yes. He's in the County Hospital at Brighton. He was found in Mr. Steels' house nearly dead. It's coming back to me now. A gun-metal cigar-case set in diamonds. That would be a dull thing with sparkling stones all over it. Of course! Why, I saw it in Van Sneck's hands the day he was assaulted. I recollect asking him where he got it from, and he said that it was a present from Henson. He was going off to meet Henson then by the corner of Brunswick Square."

"Did you see Van Sneck again that day?"

"Later on in the afternoon. We went into the Continental together. Van Sneck had been drinking."

"You did not see the cigar-case again?"

"No. Van Sneck gave me a cigar which he took from the common sort of case that they give away with seven cigars for a shilling. I asked him if he had seen Henson, and he said that he had. He seemed pretty full up against Henson, and said something about the latter having played him a scurvy trick and he didn't like it, and that he'd be even yet. I didn't take any notice of that, because it was no new thing for Henson to play it low down on his pals."

"Did anything else happen at that interview?" Chris asked, anxiously. "Think! The most trivial thing to you would perhaps be of the greatest importance to us."

Merritt knitted his brows thoughtfully.

"We had a rambling kind of talk," he said. "It was mostly Van Sneck who talked. I left him at last because he got sulky over my refusal to take a letter for him to Kemp Town."

"Indeed! Do you recollect where that letter was addressed to?"

"Well, of course I've forgotten the address; but it was to some writing man—Stone, or Flint, or——"

"Steel, perhaps?"

"That's the name! David Steel, Esq. Van Sneck wanted me to take that letter, saying as it would put a spoke in Reginald Henson's wheel, but I didn't see it. A boy took the letter at last."

"Did you see an answer come back?"

"Yes, some hour or so later. Van Sneck seemed to be greatly pleased with it. He said he was going to make an evening call late that night that would cook Henson's goose. And he was what you call gassy about it: said he had told Henson plump and plain what he was going to do, and that he was not afraid of Henson or any man breathing."

Chris asked no further questions for the moment. The track was getting clearer. She had, of course, heard by this time of the letter presumably written by David Steel to the injured man Van Sneck, which had been found in his pocket by Dr. Cross. The latter had been written most assuredly in reply to the note Merritt had just alluded to, but certainly not written by David Steel. Who, then, seeing that it was Steel's private note-paper? The more Chris thought over this the more she was puzled. Henson could have told her, of course, but nobody else.

Doubtless, Henson had started on his present campaign with a dozen different schemes. Probably one of them called for a supply of Steel's note-paper. Somebody, unknown had procured the paper, as David Steel had testimony in the form of his last quarter's account. The lad engaged by Van Sneck to carry the letter from the Continental to 15, Downend Terrace, must have been intercepted by Henson or somebody in Henson's pay and given the forged reply, a reply that actually brought Van Sneck to Steel's house on the night of the great adventure. Henson had been warned by the somewhat intoxicated Van Sneck what he was going to do, and he had prepared accordingly.

A sudden light came to Chris. Henson had found out part of their scheme. He knew that David Steel would be probably away from home on the night in question. In that case, having made certain of this, and having gained a pretty good knowledge of Steel's household habits, what easier than to enter Stel's house in his absence, wait for Van Sneck, and murder him then and there?

It was not a pretty thought, and Chris recoiled from it.

"How could Van Sneck have got into Steel's house?" she asked. "I know for a fact that Mr. Steel was not at home, and that he closed the door carefully behind him when he left the house that night."

Merritt grinned at the simplicity of the question. It was not worthy of the brilliant lady who had so far got the better of him.

"Latch-keys are very much alike," he said. "Give me three latch-keys, and I'll open ninety door out of a hundred. Give me six latch-keys of various patterns, and I'll guarantee to open the other ten."

"I had not thought of that," Chris admitted. "Did Van Sneck happen by any chance to tell you what he and Mr. Henson had been quarrelling about?"

"He was too excited to tell anything properly. He was jabbering something about a ring all the time."

"What sort of a ring?"

"That I can't tell you, miss. I fancy it was a ring that Van Sneck had made."

"Made! Is Van Sneck a working jeweller or anything of that kind?"

"He's one of the cleverest fellows with his fingers that you ever saw. Give him a bit of old gold and a few stones and he'll make you a bracelet that will pass for antique. Half the so-called antiques picked up on the Continent have been faked by Van Sneck. There was that ring, for instance, that Henson had, supposed to be the property of some swell he called Prince Rupert. Why, Van Sneck copied it for him in a couple of days, till you couldn't tell t'other from which."

Chris choked the cry that rose to her lips. She glanced at Litttimer, who had dropped his glass, and was regarding Merritt with a kind of frozen, pallid curiosity. Chris signalled Littimer to speak. She had no words of her own for the present.

"How long ago was that?" Littimer asked hoarsely.

"About seven years, speaking from memory. There were two copies made—one from description. The other was much more faithful. Perhaps there were three copies, but I forget now. Van Sneck raved over the ring; it might have been a mine of gold for the fuss he made over it."

Littimer asked no further questions. But from the glance he gave first to Chris and then to his son the girl could see that he was satisfied. He knew at last that he had done his son a grave injustice—he knew the truth. It seemed to Chris that years had slipped suddenly from his shoulders. His face was still grave and set; his eyes were hard; but the gleam in them was for the man who had done him this terrible injury.

"I fancy we are wandering from the subject," Chris said, with commendable steadiness. "We will leave the matter of the ring out of the question. Mr. Merritt, I don't propose to tell you too much, but you can help me a little farther on the way. That cigar-case you saw in Van Sneck's possession passed to Mr. Henson. By him, or by somebody in his employ, it was substituted for a precisely similar case intended for a present to Mr. Steel. The substitution has caused Mr. Steel a great deal of trouble."

"Seeing as Van Sneck was found half dead in Mr. Steel's house, and seeing as he claimed the cigar-case, what could be proved to be Van Sneck's, I'm not surprised," Merritt grinned.

"Then you know all about it?"

"Don't know anything about it," Merritt growled, doggedly. "I guessed that. When you said as the one case had been substituted for the other, it don't want a regiment of schoolmasters to see where the pea lies. What you've got to do now is to find Mr. Steel's case."

"I have already found it, as I hinted to you. It is at Rutter's, in Moreton Wells. It was sold to them by the gentleman who had given up smoking. I want you to go into Moreton Wells with me today and see if you can get at the gentleman's identity."

Mr. Merritt demurred. It was all very well for Chris, he pointed out in his picturesque language. She had her little lot of fish to fry, but at the same time he had to draw his money and be away before the police were down upon him. If Miss Lee liked to start at once—"

"I am ready at any moment," Chris said. "In any case you will have to go to Moreton Wells, and I can give you a little more information on the way."

"You had better go along, Frank," Littimer suggested, under his breath. "I fervently hope now that the day is not far distant when you can return altogether, but for the present your presence is dangerous. We must give that rascall Henson no cause for suspicion."

(To be continued.)