



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

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

CHAPTER XL.—(Continued.)

"I fancy I can even explain that, dear. My uncle came down suddenly today from London. He wanted certain papers in a great hurry. Now, those papers were locked up in a drawer at 219 given over specially to Mr. Heriot. My uncle promptly broke open the drawer and took out the papers. Besides those papers, the drawer contained a package in one of Lockhart's big lined envelopes—a registered letter envelope, in fact. My uncle had little time to spare, as he was bound to be back in London tonight. He suggested that as the back of the drawer was broken and the envelope presumably contained valuables, I had better take care of it. Well, I must admit at once that I stole the envelope open. I shouldn't have done so if Lockhart's name had not been on the flap. In a little case inside I found a diamond bracelet, which I hid in my pocket, together with a receipted bill for seventy odd pounds made out to me."

"To you?" David cried. "Do you mean to say that?"  
"Indeed I do. The receipt was made out to me, and with it was a little polite note to the effect that Messrs. Lockhart had made the change of the cigar case for the diamond bracelet, and that they hoped Miss Gates would find the matter perfectly satisfactory."

David was too astonished to say anything for the moment. The skin was now tangled to be thought out all at once. Presently he began to see his way.  
"Under ordinary circumstances the change seems impossible," he said. "Especially seeing that the juggling could not have been done without both the cases—but I had forgotten how easily the cases were changed. I have it! What is the date of that letter?"

Ruth slowly unfolded a document she had taken from her purse.  
"The day following what you call your great adventure," she said. "Henson or somebody took the real case—my case—back to Lockhart's and changed it in my name. I had previously been admiring this self-same bracelet, and they had tried to sell it to me. My dear boy, don't you see this is all part of the plot to plunge you deeper and deeper into trouble, and to force us all to speak to save you? There are at least fifteen assistants at Lockhart's. Of course the ultimate sale of the cigar case to this American could be proved, seeing that the case had got back into stock again, and at the same time the incident of the change quite forgotten."

"And when you go and ask questions at Lockhart's—as you were pretty sure to do, as Henson knew—you are told of the sale only to the American. Depend upon it, that American was Henson, that man is so cunning, too complex. And some of these days it is going to prove his fall."

David nodded thoughtfully. And yet, without something very clever and intricate in the way of a scheme, Henson could not have placed him in his present fix.  
"There is only one thing to be done," he said. "You and I must go down to Lockhart's and make a few inquiries. With that diamond bracelet and the papers in your possession you should have no difficulty in refreshing their memories. Will you have some tea?"

"I am too excited," Ruth laughed. "I couldn't eat or drink anything just at present. David, what a lovely house you have."  
"I'm glad to hear that you are going to like it," David said.  
Lockhart's received their customers in the usual courtly style. They were sorry they had no recollection of the transaction to which madam referred. The sale of the bracelet was clear, because that was duly and properly recorded on the books, and as indeed was the sale of the gun-metal cigar case to an American gentleman at the Metropolitan. If madam said that she had purchased the cigar case, why—still the polite assistant was most courteously incredulous.

The production of the letter made no difference. There was a passing of confidences from one plate glass counter to another, and presently another assistant came forward. The profusion of papers that there had been a mistake, but he remembered the incident perfectly.  
"It was the day before he had departed on his usual monthly visit to the firm's Paris branch. Madam had certainly purchased the cigar-case; but before the sale could be posted in the stock ledger madam had sent a gentleman to change the case for the diamond bracelet previously admired. The speaker had attended to both the sale and the exchange; in fact, he had been waiting for him during the latter incident."

"I trust there is nothing wrong?" he asked, anxiously.  
"Not in the least," Ruth hastened to reply. "The whole matter is a kind of comedy that I wanted to solve. It is a family joke, you understand. And who made the exchange?"  
"Mr. Gates, madam. A tall gentleman, dressed in—"

CHAPTER XLII.

A Delicate Errand.

It looked like being a long, dull evening for Steel if he were not going to the theatre or anything of that kind. He generally read till about eleven o'clock after which he sat up for another couple of hours, nothing of the days' task for tomorrow. Tonight he could only wander restlessly about his conservatory, snipping off a dead leaf here and there, or some ferning where the whole thing was going to end.

With a certain sense of relief David heard the front door-bell toll about eleven o'clock. Somebody was coming to see him, and it didn't matter much who in Steel's present frame of mind. But he went in to the study with a feeling of genuine pleasure as Hatherly Bell was announced. "My dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you," he cried. "Take the big armchair, and make yourself comfortable. That's better."

"I'm tired out," Bell said. "In London all day, and since with Cross. Can you put me up for the night?"  
"My bachelor bedroom is always ready, Bell."

"Thanks. I don't fancy you need be under any apprehension that anybody has spirited Van Sneek away. In the first place Henson, who seems to be in a terrible state about it. He wanted very badly to remain at Litterer, but when he heard that Van Sneek had left the hospital he came down here; in fact, we travelled together. Of course he said nothing whatever about Van Sneek, whom he is supposed to know nothing about, but I could see that he was terribly disturbed. The worst of it is that Cross was going to get me to operate on Van Sneek; and Hatherly, who seems wonderfully better, was going to assist."

"Is your unfortunate friend up to that kind of thing now?" David asked.  
"I fancy so. Do you know that Heritage used to have a fairly good practice near Litterer Castle? Lord Litterer knows him well. I want to get at the reason why Henson has been so confoundedly good to Heritage. For years he has kept his eye upon him; for years he has practically provided him with a home at Palmer's. And when Heritage mentions Henson's name he always does so with a kind of forced grandeur, as if he were going to be useful to us."

"I fancy so. Mind you, it is only my ideas which I can influence, and I want a better word. And what have you been doing lately?"  
"David proceeded to inform in full detail, Bell followed the account with the deepest interest. Then he proceeded to tell his own story. David listened with a keen eye to the tale of the man with the thumb-nail."

"So Miss Chris hopes to hypnotize the man with the thumb-nail?" David asked.  
"I have seen more of her than I have, Bell. Does she strike you as she strikes me—a girl of wonderfully acute mind allied with a plain and unobtrusive exterior?"  
"She is that and more," Bell said, warmly. "Now that she is free to act she has developed wonderfully. I look upon her cleverly she works most of her business, how utterly she puzzled Henson, and how she helped me to get into Litterer's good books again without Henson's even guessing at the reason. And now she has forced the confidence of that racial Merritt. She has saved him from a gaol which she might have thrown him at any moment, she has convinced him that she is something exceedingly brilliant in the way of an adventuress, with a great coup ahead. Later on she will use Merritt, and a fine hard-cutting tool she will find him."

"Where is Henson at the present moment?" David asked.  
"I left him in London this afternoon," Bell replied. "But I haven't the slightest doubt in the world that he has made his way to Brighton by this time. In all probability he has gone to the hotel where Bell passed as the telephone bell rang out shrilly. The mere sound of it thrilled both of them with excitement. And what a useful thing the telephone had proved! "Are you there?" came the quick, small whisper. "Is that you, Mr. Steel? I am Enid Henson."

"There was a long pause, during which David was listening intently. Bell could see him growing rigid with the prospect of something keen, alert, and vigorous."  
"Bell is here," he said at this moment, "I tell him. Don't go away, please. Under the circumstances it might be dangerous for me to ring you. . . . Just a moment. Here's a pretty new one."  
"Well," Bell said, impatiently, "I'm only a mere man, after all."

"Because, my dear friend, I can easily manage the business single handed, and because you must run no risk of meeting Henson's yard. You can't now suppose to know where the family are, nor are you supposed to take the faintest interest in them. Stay here and make your best of it. I will be here in an hour or thereabouts. I shall be over in less than an hour."

David hung up the receiver and proceeded to don a short covert coat and a cap. In the breast pocket of the coat he placed a revolver.  
"Just as well to be on the safe side," he said. "Though I am not likely to be troubled with the man with the thumb-nail again. Still, Henson may have other thoughts, he may even know where Van Sneek is at the present moment, for let me give you a cigar and a whisky and soda and make you comfortable. That's better."

"I'm tired out," Bell said. "In London all day, and since with Cross. Can you put me up for the night?"  
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else to occupy her mind. Reginald Henson was coming up the drive. Just for an instant Enid felt inclined to despair.  
"Williams," she cried, "Mr. Henson is here. On no account must he see our unfortunate visitor. He cannot possibly know that Van Sneek is here; the whole thing is an accident. I am going down into the hall. I shall contrive to get Mr. Henson into my room by the back door. You must smuggle Mr. Van Sneek into your apartments over the stable. You will be perfectly safe if you go down the back staircase as soon as the drawing-room door closes, go."

Williams nodded. He was essentially a man of action rather than words. With a quick, furtive glance he crossed to the window and fled into the night. A raging madness seemed to have come over her again; she laughed and she cried as she opened up into the bushes, followed by Henson. In his fear and desperation the latter had quite forgotten the dogs. He was in the midst of them, they were clustered round himself and Mrs. Henson, before he was aware of the fact.  
"Give me the ring," he said. "You can't have it yet. Some day I will restore it to you. Be sensible. If anybody should happen to see you." Mrs. Henson merely laughed. The dogs were gambling around her like so many kittens. They did not seem to be in the least annoyed by her presence. He came on again, he made a grab for her dress, but the rotten fabric parted like a cobweb in his hand. A Henson might have been with a very bad temper, but he was not in a bad temper. "Give it me," he hissed, "or I will tear it from you."

CHAPTER XLIII.  
Nearing the Truth.  
David Steel stood contemplating the weird scene with almost doubting eyes. In his wildest moments he had never imagined anything more dramatic than this. The candle in the silver sconce that Mrs. Henson had snatched up before her flight was perilously near her hair. Henson caught her once more in a fierce grip. David could stand it no longer. As he stepped forward, there was a dull thud, and Henson, without having the least idea what had happened, fell as if he were struck by a very heavy idea of his surroundings for a moment or two.

Equally unconscious that she had a protruding hand, Mrs. Henson turned and fled for the house. A minute later she was followed by Henson, still puzzling his racking head to know what had happened. David would have followed, but the need for caution flashed upon him. If he stood there perfectly still Henson would never know who his antagonist was. David stood close to the door, he glanced round to see that the object glittering near to him. It was the ruby ring!  
"Be you there, sir?" a rusty voice whispered close by. "What a lovely house you have!"  
"I am, Williams," David replied; "I have been waiting for some time."  
Williams chuckled, making no kind of apology for his words.  
"I've been looking after our man, sir," he said. "That Dutch chap what Miss Enid stands for, he's a good one. He's a bit of a business in the sherry just now. My! if I didn't feel good when you laid out Henson on the grass. The sound of that such a creature as Reginald Henson, was for me. And he's gone off to his room with a basin of vinegar and a ream of brown paper. Will you not break his neck?"

David suggested that the law took a prejudiced view of that kind of thing, and that it would be a pity to hang anybody for such a creature as Reginald Henson.  
"Our man is all right," he said.  
"As a trivet," said Williams, "sleeping like a baby, he is in my own bed over the stable. I'll show you the slightest doubt that he has been here many times before, but Williams says he is asleep. Pity to wake him just yet, don't you think so?"  
"Perhaps it is," but Henson was horribly afraid of our dear friend Reginald, all the same."  
"Our dear Reginald will not trouble us just yet. He came down as far as London with Bell. Of course he had heard the news of Van Sneek's flight. Was he disturbed?"  
"I have never seen him in such a passion before, but he was horribly afraid of something. And he has made a discovery."

"He hasn't found out that your sister is in Litterer Castle? That is really the most concealing part of the business. He has been in Litterer for a day or two, and he has not the remotest idea that Christian Lee is our Chris."  
"A feather in your sister's cap. She has quite captivated Litterer, Bell says."  
"And she played her part splendidly. I thought you had not noticed that Hatherly has cleared himself in the eyes of Lord Litterer at last. Did Reginald suspect?"  
"Nothing," Steel said. "He is utterly and hopelessly puzzled over the whole business. And he has managed to convince him that he is no aristocrat at all. That business over the Benrath was really a brilliant bit of comedy. But what has Henson found out?"  
"That Chris is not dead. He has seen Walker and the undertaker. But he does not know yet that Dr. Bell was in the house that eventful night, which is a blessing, by the way. In fact, Reginald has not been quite the same man since Rollo nearly killed him that exciting evening. His nerves seem to be greatly shaken."

"That is because the steel feels the net closing round him," Steel said. "It will run me—£10,000. What do you do with all the money? You profess to give it all the charity. But I know better. Much you give away that money may come back from it. But that money you get from you, ah, how I could expose you, Reginald Henson!"  
"Instead of which you will let me have that £10,000?"  
"I cannot. You will ruin me. Have you not had enough? Give me the ring."

Williams raised her arm, with the dust rising in choking clouds around her. Then with an activity astonishing in one of her years she sprang upon Henson and fastened the ring on his grasp. The thing was so totally unexpected from the usually gentle lady that Henson could only gasp in astonishment.  
"I don't say I have it," Mrs. Henson cried. "I have it, and I am free!"  
Henson sprang towards her. With a quick, furtive glance she crossed to the window and fled into the night. A raging madness seemed to have come over her again; she laughed and she cried as she opened up into the bushes, followed by Henson. In his fear and desperation the latter had quite forgotten the dogs. He was in the midst of them, they were clustered round himself and Mrs. Henson, before he was aware of the fact.  
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Henson smilingly held the gem aloft. Mrs. Henson raised her arm, with the dust rising in choking clouds around her. Then with an activity astonishing in one of her years she sprang upon Henson and fastened the ring on his grasp. The thing was so totally unexpected from the usually gentle lady that Henson could only gasp in astonishment.  
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servant, who accompanied him, was carried into effect, and so the passage for Prince Rupert was made free.  
"The race would have succeeded all round but for some little accident that I need not go into now. Rupert Litterer was laid by the heels, his disguise was torn off, and he stood face to face with his hereditary foe. He was told that he had but an hour to live."  
"If you have any favor to ask, say it," Carfax said.  
"I have no favor to ask, properly so-called," Litterer replied; "but I am loath to die without knowing whether or not I have left anybody to succeed me—anybody who will avenge the crime upon you and your family. Let me see to it that you are as far as Henson Grange, and I pledge you my word I will return in the morning."  
"But Carfax laughed the suggestion to scorn. The Court party were all liars and perjurers, and their word was not to be taken.  
"It is as I say," Rupert Litterer repeated. "My wife lies ill at Henson Grange and in sore trouble about me. And I should like to see my child before I die."  
"Then you shall have the chance," Carfax sneered. "I will keep you a close prisoner here for two days, and if at the end of that time nothing happens, you die. On the other hand, a child is born to you, then you shall go from here a free man."  
"And so the compact was made. Unfortunately, as it happened, as the case may be, the story got abroad, and some indiscreet person carried the news to Dame Litterer. Ill as she was, she was carried upon getting up and going to Carfax's camp at once. She had barely reached there before—well, long ere Rupert Litterer's probation was over, she was the father of a noble boy. They say that the Roundheads made a cradle for the child out of a leather breastplate, and carried it in triumph round the camp. And they held the infant to Carfax as his possession. The story spread and spread until it came to the ears of Prince Rupert."

"Then he went to see Dame Litterer, and from his own hand he drew what is known in our family as Prince Rupert's ring. He placed in on Dame Litterer's hand, there to remain for good and all day and night. When Frank was up it was to be put aside for the bride of the heir of the house for ever, to be worn by her till a year and a day had elapsed after his first child was born. And that has been done for all time, my aunt, Lady Litterer, being the last to wear it. After Frank was born it was put carefully away for his bride, and until lately we fancied that the ring was lost to us for ever. There is, in a few words, the story of Prince Rupert's ring. So far it is quite common property."

"Enid ceased to speak for a time. But it was evident that she had more to say. An inter-jection of a gasp, and she was a pretty one to put into a book, especially as it is quite true. But you have not said the ring, you say nothing. Enid replied.  
"Indeed, I hardly knew what to think. Sometimes I imagined that Reginald Henson had it. It was a pretty good copy of the original. As I have said, a copy cannot have been made from mere instructions. And if I could only get the original our troubles are all over. But I do not see how the ring has anything to do with—"

"With the family dishonor. Now, I am coming to that. We arrive at the time when my father and I were in London. Litterer and Frank were all living happily at Litterer Castle. I told you just now that the Carfax estate was in the hands of the law. My family is still extant and powerful, but the feud between the two houses has never ceased. Of course, people do not carry on a feud for centuries, but the families have not visited for centuries."  
"There was a daughter Claire, whom Frank Litterer got to know by some means or other. But for the silly family feud nobody would have noticed or cared, and there would have been an end to the matter. But the Carfax family loved my sister Chris, and we all knew that he would marry her some of these days."  
"When Litterer was furiously angry when he heard that Frank and Claire had got on speaking terms. He imperiously forbade any further intercourse, and said that he would see to it that the consequence was that those two foolish young people elected to fancy themselves greatly aggrieved, and so a kind of Romeo and Juliet, Montague and Capulet, business sprang up. There were secret meetings, meetings entirely innocent, I believe, and a correspondence. But, as became romantic, the letters he passed the ring also, and a large sum of money in notes that he had just received from his tenants. Frank had stolen the ring and the money, or he had secured the ring as if he had had it. I shall not soon forget that day."

"After taking the letters, Frank had gone straight to the Metropolitan Hotel, and it was a little time before he had returned. Within an hour of the discovery of his loss Lord Litterer met Claire Carfax on the cliff. She was wearing Prince Rupert's ring. Frank had sent it to her, she said. Anybody but a man in a furious passion would have seen that the girl was not responsible for her actions. Litterer told her the true circumstances of the case. She laughed at him in a queer, vacant way and fled to the woods. She went down to the beach, where she took a boat and rowed herself into the bay. A mile or more from the shore she jumped into the water, and from that day to this nothing further has been seen of poor Claire Carfax."

"I will never come back again, my friend," the Prince said.  
"Rupert Litterer said he was prepared to run all risk of that. 'And if I do die you shall tell my wife, sir,' he said. 'And when the child is born, tell him that his father died as he should have done for his King and his country.'  
"Oh, there is a child coming!" Rupert asked.  
"Litterer replied that for aught he knew he was a father already. And then went his way into the camp of the foe with his curls cut short and in the guise of a countryman who comes with valuable information. And, what is more, he reformed his way into Carfax's tent, and at the point of a dagger compelled him to write a certain order which my ancestor—"

"I am going to tell you the story of the great sorrow that has darkened all our lives, but I shall have to go a long way back to do it," Enid said. "I go back to the troublous day of Charles, as far back as the disastrous fight of Naseby. Of course I am speaking more from a Royalist point of view, for the Litterers were always followers of the Court."  
"Mind you, there is doubtless a deal that is legendary about what I am going to tell you. But the ring given to my ancestor Rupert Litterer by Prince Rupert himself is an actuality."  
"Naseby was over, and so the legend goes. Prince Rupert found himself deserted by his army, and in dire peril of capture by Cromwell's troops, under one Colonel Carfax, a near neighbor of Rupert Litterer. Indeed, the Carfax estates still remain in Carfax yet."  
"Now, Carfax was hated by all those who were attached to the fortunes of the King. Seeing that he was of aristocratic birth, it was held that he had violated his caste and creed by taking sides with the Roundheads. History has told us that he was right, and that the Cavaliers, not the Roundheads, were fighting a dubious cause. But I need not go into that. Carfax was a hard, stern man who spared nobody, and many were the stories told of his cruelty."  
"He and Rupert Litterer were especially at daggers drawn. I believe that both of them had been in love with the same woman or something of that kind. And the fact that she did not marry either made little difference to the bitterness between them."  
"Well, Carfax was pressing close on Rupert, so close, indeed, that unless some strategy were adopted the brilliant cavalry leader was in dire peril. It was there that my ancestor, Rupert Litterer, came forward with his scheme. He offered to disguise himself and go into the camp of Carfax and take him prisoner. The idea was to steal into the tent of Carfax and, by threatening him with his life, compel him to show certain orders, the result of which would be that Prince Rupert could get away."  
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