

THE CRIMSON BLIND

BY FRED M. WHITE

"That I will tell you presently. Mr. Rawlins, you have a daughter."

The hard look died out of the latter's eyes.

"Whom I love better than my life," he said. "There are two John Rawlins—the one you know; and, well, the other one. I should be sorry to show you the other one."

"For the sake of your daughter I don't want to see the other one."

"Then why do you pit yourself against me like this?"

"I don't think you are displaying your usual lucidity," Chris said, coolly. Her heart was beating fast, but she did not show it. "Just reflect for a moment. I have found you out. I know pretty well what you are. I need not have told you anything of this. I need have done no more than gone to the police and told them where to find you. But I don't want to do that; I hate to do it after what I saw last night. You have your child, and she loves you. Could I unmask you before her eyes?"

"You would kill her," Rawlins said, a little unsteadily; "and you would kill me, I verily believe. That child is all the world to me. I committed my first theft so that she could have the change the doctors declared to be absolutely necessary. I intended to repay the money—the old, old story. And I was found out by my employers and discharged. Thank goodness, my wife was dead. Since then I have preyed on society. But I need not go in to that sordid story. You are not going to betray me?"

"I said before that I should do nothing of the kind."

"Then why do you let me know that you have discovered my identity?"

"Because I want you to help me. I fancy you respect my sex, Mr. Rawlins."

"Call me Smith, please. I have always respected your sex. All the kindness and sympathy of my life have been for women. And I can lay my hand on my heart and declare that I never wronged one of them in thought or deed. The man who is cruel to women is no man."

"And yet your friend Reginald Henson is that sort."

Rawlins smiled again. He began to understand a little of what was passing in Chris' mind.

"Would you mind going a little more into details?" he suggested. "So Henson is that sort. Well, I didn't know, or he had never had my assistance in his little scheme. Oh, of course, I have known him for years as a scoundrel. So he oppresses women."

"He has done so for a long time; he is blighting my life and the life of my sister and another. And it seems to me that I have that rascal under my thumb at last. You cannot save him; you can do no more than place obstacles in my way; but even those I should overcome. And you admit that I am likely to be dangerous to you."

"You can kill my daughter. I am in your power to that extent."

"As if I should," Chris said. "It is only Reginald Henson whom I want to strike. I want you to answer a few questions; to tell me why you went to certain places for you, and why you subsequently went to Lockhart's at Brighton and bought a precisely similar one."

Rawlins looked in surprise at the speaker. A tinge of admiration was on his face. There was a keenness and audacity after his own heart.

"Go on," he said, slowly. "Tell me everything openly and freely, and when you have done so I will give you all the information that lies in my power."

CHAPTER L
Rawlins Is Candid.

"So Reginald Henson bullies women," Rawlins said, after a long pause. There was a queer smile on his face; he appeared perfectly at his ease. He did not look in the least like a desperado, a criminal whom Chris could have driven out of the country by one word to the police. In his perfectly-fitting gray suit he seemed more like a lord of ancient acres than anything else.

"It is not a nice thing to bully women," Reginald Henson finds it quite a congenial occupation," Chris said, bitterly.

Rawlins pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"I am to a certain extent in your power," he said. "You have discovered my identity at a time when I could sacrifice thousands for it not to be known that I am in England. How you have discovered me matters as little as how a card player gets the ace of trumps. And I understand that the price of your silence is the betrayal of Henson."

"That is about what it comes to," said Chris.

"In the parlance of the lower type of rascal, I am to be 'bound on my pal'?"

"If you like to put it in that way, Mr. Smith."

"I never did such a thing in my life before. And, at the same time, I don't mind admitting that I was never so sorry as I am at the present moment I am on the verge of a large fortune, and I am making my grand coup honestly. Would you deem it exaggeration on my part if I said that I was exceedingly glad of the fact?"

"Mr. Smith," Chris said, earnestly, "I have seen how fond you are of your daughter."

"That is an exceedingly clever remark of yours, young lady," Rawlins smiled. "You know that you have found the soft spot in my nature and you are going to hammer on it till you reduce me to submission. I am not a religious man, but my one prayer is that Grace shall never find me out. When my coup comes off I am going to settle in England and become intensely respectable."

"With Reginald Henson for your secretary, I suppose?"

"No, I am going to drop the past. But to return to our subject. Are you asking me to betray Henson to the police?"

"Nothing of the kind," Chris cried, hastily. "I—I would do anything to avoid a family scandal. All I want is a controlling power over the man."

"The man who bullies women?"

"The same. For seven years he has wrecked the lives of five of us—three women. He has parted husband and wife, he has driven the man I love into exile. And the poor wife is gradually going hopelessly mad under his cruelties. And he blackmails us, he extracts large sums of money from us. If you only knew what we have suffered at the hands of the rascal!"

Rawlins looked in sympathy.

"I did not imagine that," he said. "Of course, I have known for years that Henson was pretty bad. You may smile, but I have never had any sympathy with his methods and hypocritical ways, perhaps because I never did anything of the kind myself. Nobody can say that I ever robbed anybody who was poor or defenseless or foolish. By heavens, I am a more honest man than hundreds of London and New York capitalists. It is this hard rogues amongst us who have always been my mark. But to injure and wound women and children!"

"Which means that you are going to help me?" Chris asked, quietly.

"As far as I can, certainly. Especially as you are going to let Henson down easily. Now please ask me any questions that you like."

"This is very good of you," said Chris. "In the first place, did you ever hear Mr. Henson speak of his relations or friends?"

"Nobody beyond Lord Littimer. You see, Henson and I were extremely useful to one another once or twice, but he never trusted me, and I never trusted him. I never cared for his methods."

"Did you go to Brighton lately on purpose to help him?"

"Certainly not. I had business in Brighton for some considerable time, and my daughter was with me. When she went away to stay with friends for

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