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 XXXII.—(Cont.nued.)

"Indeed? I should like to know how you propose to do that."

"I shall prove it at once. You were under the impression that you possessed the only copy of the 'Crimson Blind' in existence. When you lost yours and a copy of the picture was found in my possession, you were perfectly justified in believing that I was the thief."

"I did take that extreme view of the matter," Littimer said, drily.

"Under the circumstances I should have done the same thing. But you were absolutely wrong, because there were two copies of the picture. Yours was stolen by an enemy of mine who had the most urgent reasons for discrediting me in your eyes, and the other was concealed amongst my belongings. It was no loss to the thief, because subsequently the stolen one—my own one being restored to you—could have been exposed and disposed of as a new find. Your print is in the house?"

"It hangs in the gallery at the present moment."

"Very good. Then, my lord, what do you say to this?"

Bell took the roll of paper from his pocket, and gravely flattened it out on the table before him, so that the full rays of the electric light should fall upon it. Littimer was a fine study of open-mouthed surprise. He could only stand there gasping, touching the stained paper with his fingers and breathing heavily.

"Here is a facsimile of your treasure," Bell went on. "Here is the same thing. You are a good judge on these matters, and I venture to say you will call it genuine. There is nothing of forgery about the engraving."

"Good heavens, no," Littimer snapped. "Any fool could see that."

"Which you will admit is a very great point in my favor," Bell said, gravely.

"I begin to think that I have done you a great injustice," Littimer admitted; "but under the circumstances, I don't see how I could have done anything else. Look at that picture. It is exactly the same as mine. There is exactly the same discoloration in the margin in exactly the same place."

"Probably they lay flat on the top of one another for scores of years."

"Possibly. I can't see the slightest difference in the smallest particular. Even now I cannot rid myself of the feeling that I am the victim of some kind of plot or delusion. The house is quie now and there is nobody about. Before I believe the evidence of my senses—and I have had cause to doubt them more than once—I should like to compare this print with mine. Will you follow me to the gallery, if you havent' forgotten the way?"

Littimer took up the treasure from the table gingerly.

He was pleased and at the same time disappointed; pleased to find that he had been mistaken all these years, sorry in the knowledge that his picture was unique no longer. He said nothing until the alcove was reached, and Chris drew back in the shadow to let the others pass.

"N w to settle the question for all time," Littimer said. "Will you be so good as to turn on the electric light? You will find the switch in the angle of the wall on your right. And when we have settled the affair and I have apologized to you in due form, you shall command my services and my purse to right the wrong. If it costs me £10,000 the man who has done this thing shall suffer. Please to put up the light, Bell."

Chris listened breathlessly. She was not quite certain what she was about to see. She could hear Bell fumbling for the light, she heard the click of the switch, and then she saw the brilliant belt of flame flooding the alcove. Littimer paused and glanced at Bell, the latter looked round the alcove as if seeking for something.

"I cannot see the picture here," he said. "If I have made a mistake——"

Littimer stood looking at the speaker with eyes like blazing stars. Just for a moment or two he was speechless with indignation.

"You charlatan," he said, hoarsely. "You bare-faced trickster."

Bell started back. His mute question stung Littimer to the quick.

"You wanted to be cleared," the latter said. "You wanted to befool me again. You come here in some infernally cunning fashion, you steal my picture from the frame and have the matchless audacity to pass it off for a second one. Man alive, if it were earlier I would have you flogged from the house like the ungrateful dog that you are."

Chris checked down the cry that rose to her lips. She saw, as in a flash of lightning, the brilliancy and simplicity and cunning of Henson's latest and most masterly scheme.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The Frame of the Picture.

After the first passionate outburst of scorn Lord Littimer looked at his visitor quietly. There was something almost amusing in the idea that Bell should attempt such a trick upon him. And the listener was thoroughly enjoying the scene now. There was quite an element of the farcical about it. In the brilliant light she could see Littimer's dark, bitter face and the helpless amazement on the strong features of Hatherly Bell. And meanwhile, the man who had brought the possible situation about was calmly sleeping after his strenuous exertions.

Chris smiled to herself as she thought out her brilliant coup. It looked to her nothing less than a stroke of genius, two strokes, in fact, as will be seen presently. Before many hours were over Henson's position in the house would be seriously weakened. He had done a clever thing, but Chris saw her way to a cleverer one still.

Meanwhile the two men were regarding one another suspiciously. On a round Chippendale table the offending Rembrandt lay between them.

"I confess," Bell said, at length, "I confess that I am utterly taken by surprise. And yet I need not be so astonished when I come to think of the amazing cunning and audacity of my antagonist. He has more foresight than myself. Lord Littimer, will you be so kind as to repeat your last observation over again?"

"I will emphasize it, if you like?" Littimer replied. "For some deep purpose of your own, you desired to make friends with me again. You tell me you are in a position to clear your character. Very foolishly I consent to see you. You come here with a roll of paper in your possession purporting to be a second copy of my famous print. All the time you knew it to be mine—mine, stolen an hour or two ago and passed instantly to you. Could audacity go farther? And then you ask me to believe that you came down from town with a second engraving in your possession."

"As I hope to be saved, I swear it!" Bell cried.

"Of course you do. A man with your temerity would swear anything. Credulous as I may be, I am not credulous enough to believe that my picture would be stolen again at the very time that you found yours."

"Abstracted by my enemy on purpose to land me in this mess."

"Ridiculous," Littimer cried. "shaw, I am a fool to stand here arguing; I am a fool to let you stay in the house. Why, I don't believe you could bring a solitary witness to prove that yonder picture was yours."

"You are mistaken, my lord. I could bring several."

"Credible witnesses? Witnesses whose characters would bear investigation?"

"I fancy so," Bell said, quietly. "Two nights ago, for instance, I showed the very picture lying before you to a lady of your acquaintance, Miss Enid Henson. I couldn't have had your picture two nights ago, could I? And Miss Henson was graciously pleased to observe that I had been made the victim of a vile conspiracy."

"Why do you insult me by mentioning that name?" Littimer said, hoarsely. His face was very pale, and sombre anger smouldered in his eyes. "Tell me you showed the thing to my wife next."

"I did," said Bell, coolly. "Lady Littimer was in the room at the time."

Something like a groan escaped from Littimer's pallid lips. The smouldering light in his eyes flashed into flame. He advanced upon Bell with a quivering, uplifted arm: Chris slipped swiftly out of the shade and stood between the two men.

"Dr. Bell speaks the truth," she said. "And I am going to prove it."

Littimer dropped into a chair and gave way to silent laughter. His mood had changed utterly. He lounged there, a cynical, amused man of the world again.

"Upon my word, I am vastly obliged to you for your comedy," he said. "I hope your salary as leading lady in Bell's company is a handsome one, Miss Lee."

"Let us hope that it is more handsome than your manners, my lord," Chris said, tartly. "I beg to remark that I have never seen Dr. Bell before. Oh, yes, I have been listening to your conversation, because I expected something of the kind. The Rembrandt was stolen some time before Dr. Bell arrived here, and in due course I shall show you the thief. Lord Littimer, I implore you to be silent and discreet in this matter. Have a little patience. Quite by accident I have made an important discovery, but this is hardly the place to discuss it. Before daylight I hope to be able to prove beyond question that you have greatly wronged Dr. Bell."

"I shall be glad to be convinced of it," Littimer said, sincerely. "But why this secrecy?"

"Secrecy is absolutely necessary for the conviction of the thief."

Bell looked eagerly at the speaker.

"I have not the remotest notion who this young lady is," he said, "but I am greatly obliged to her."

"My secretary, Miss Lee," Littimer murmured; "an American from Boston, and evidently a great deal cleverer than I gave her credit for, which is saying a great deal. Miss Lee, if you know anything, I implore you to speak."

"Not here," Chris said, firmly. "Stone walls have ears. I tell you the Rembrandt was stolen just before Dr. Bell reached the house. Also I tell you it is imperative that nobody but ourselves must know the fact for the present. You trust me, Lord Littimer?"

"I trust you as implicitly as I do anybody."

Chris smiled at the diplomatic response. She approached the panel of the wall on which the Rembrandt had been fastened. She indicated the long steel stays which had been clamped on to the iron frame. "Look at them," she said. "It was my suggestion that the stays should be attached to the frame to prevent anything like this robbery. I made the stays myself. And what happened to justify my prudence? Why, the very same night somebody came here after the picture."

"Henson!" Littimer cried. "Ah! But he could have come openly."

"It is not in the nature of the man to do things openly," Chris went on. "I know more about the man than you imagine, but that you are to keep to yourself. He comes here in the dead of the night and he gets into the house through an upstairs window. A man of his bulk, if you please! And he comes here hotfoot and breathless at a time when common prudence should have kept him in bed. Why? Because he knows that Dr. Bell has the other Rembrandt and will come to prove it, and because he knows that if he can steal the Littimer Rembrandt he can precipitate the very impasse that he has brought about. But he could not steal the picture because it was fast."

"You are very clever young lady," Littimer said, drily. "You will tell me next that you expected Henson to try this thing on."

"I did," Chris said, cooly. "I had a telegram to warn me so."

Littimer smiled. All this mystery and cleverness was after his own heart. He lighted his cigarette and tendered his case in the friendliest possible manner to Bell.

"Go on," he said, "I am deeply interested."

"I prefer not to go into details," Chris resumed. "All I ask you to do is to be entirely guided by me when you have heard my story. I have admitted to you that I knew when Henson was coming, and why am I interested? Because it happens that Reignald Henson has greatly injured someone I cared for deeply. Well, I fastened up the picture—he came. He sneaked in like the thief that he was because his accomplice and tool had failed to save him the trouble. Lord Littimer, I will not pain you by saying who Henson's accomplice was."

Littimer nooded gloomily.

"Not that I blame that accomplice; he could not help himself. Ah, when the whole truth comes to be told, what a black business it will be. Well, Henson came to steal the picture and I caught him in the act. If you had seen his fat, greasy, crestfallen face! Then he pretended that it was all done for a jest and as a warning to Lord Littimer. And Lord Littimer, the most cynical of men, allowed it to pass."

"I couldn't see what he had to gain," Littimer pleaded. "I don't now, as a matter of fact."

"Neither will you for the present," said Chris. "Still, you will be so good as to assume the same hospitality and courtesy towards Henson as you extended at present."

"I daresay I can manage it," said Littimer, cynically, "I used to be a society man once."

"Henson did not deceive me for a moment," Chris went on. "He was bound to have the picture, and, being baffled one way, he tried another. Look here, Lord Littimer. Let me assume for a moment that Dr. Bell came down here to steal your picture, get rid of the frame, and palm off your own engraving for another. Now, in the name of common sense, let me ask you a single question. Could Dr. Bell have possibly known that the frame of the Rembrandt was securely fastened to the wall and that I had attached it quite recently? And could he in the short time at his disposal have procured the necessary tools to cut away the stays? Again, Dr. Bell can prove, I suppose, exactly what time he left London today. No, we must look farther for the thief."

"There is something else we have to look for," said Dr. Bell. "And that is the frame. You say it was of iron and consequently heavy. The thief would discard the frame and roll up the print."

"That is a brilliant suggestion," said Chris, eagerly.

"And if we only had the frame I could set Lord Littimer's doubt to rest entirely. I happen to know that the real thief came and went by the cliff under the terrace. If the frame was thrown into the gorse, there it—"

"Might stay for ages," Littimer exclaimed. "By Jove, I'm just in the mood to carry this business a stage or two farther before I go to bed. Bell, there are two or three cycle lamps in the gun-room. You used to be a pretty fearless climber. What do you say to a hunt round for an hour or two whilst the house is quiet?"

Bell assented eagerly. Chris waited with what patience she could command till daylight began to show faintly and redly in the east. Then she heard the sound of voices outside, and Littimer and Bell staggered in carrying the frame between them.

"Got it," Littimer exclaimed, with the triumphant exultation of a schoolboy who has successfully looted a rare bird's-nest.

"We found it half-way down the cliff, hidden behind a patch of samphire. And it doesn't seem to be any the worse for the adventure. Now, Miss Wiseacre, seeing that we have the frame, perhaps you will fulfil your promise of convincing me, once and for all, that yonder Rembrandt cannot possibly belong to me."

"I am going to do so," Chris said, quietly. "You told me you had to cut the margin of your print by an inch or so round to fit that quaint old frame. So far as I can see, the print before you is quite intact. Now, if it is too large for the frame—"

Littimer nodded eagerly. Bell fitted the dingy paper to the back of the frame and smiled. There was an inch or more to spare all round. Nobody spoke for a moment.

"You could make it smaller, but couldn't make it bigger," Littimer said. "Bell, when I have sufficiently recovered I'll make a humble and abject apology to you. And now, wise woman from the West, what is the next act in the play?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The Puzzling of Henson.

Chis smiled with the air of one who is perfectly satisfied with her work.

"For the present I fancy we have done enough," she said. "I want to go to bed now, and I want you both to do the same. Also I shall be glad if you will come down in the morning as if nothing had happened. Tell Reginald Henson casually that you have been convinced that you have done Dr. Bell a grave injustice, and give no kind of particulars. And please treat Mr. Henson in the same fashion as before. There is only one other thing."

"Name it, and it is your," Littimer cried.

"Well, cut the margin off that print, or at any rate turn the margin down, fit it into the frame, and hang it up as if nothing had happened."

Littimer looked at Chris with a puzzled expression for a moment, and then his features relaxed into a satyr-like grin.

"Capital," he said, "I quite understand what you mean. And I must be there to see it, eh?—yes, I must be there to see. I would not miss it for strawberry leaves."

The thing was done and the picture restored to its place. Bell drew Chris aside for a moment.

"Do you rise early in the morning?" he asked, meaningly.

"Always," Chris replied, demurely. "I find the terrace charming before breakfast. Good-night."

Bell ws down betimes despite the fact that it had been daylight before he was in bed. Along the terrace, looking over the cliffs, Chris was already walking, a great cluster of red and yellow roses in her hand. She looked as fresh and bright as if she and excitement were strangers. All the same she seemed to avoid Bell's eyes.

"Isn't it lovely here?" she exclaimed. "And these roses with the dew still upon them. Well, Dr. Bell, have you made fresh discoveries?"

"I have discovered that Henson is going to take his breakfast in bed," Bell said gravely. "Also that he requires a valet at half-past ten. At that time I hope to be in the corridor with Lord Littimer and yourself. Also I have made a further discovery.

"And what is that, Dr. Bell?"

"That you and I have met before—once before when I attended you in a kind of official capacity, and when I behaved in a distinctly discreditable professional manner. Dr. Walker was present. Dr. Walker seems to have been singularly short-sighted."

The roses fell from Chis's hands on to the path. Her face had grown very pale indeed; there was a frightened, appealing look in her eyes.

"Dr. Bell," she gasped, "do you suppose that anybody else knows—Henson, for instance? And I imagined that I had utterly deceived him!"

Bell smiled meaningly.

"I don't think you need have the slightest anxiety on that score," he said. "You see, Henson is comfortably assured that you are dead and buried. Whereas I know all about it. Fortunately for me, I became mixed up in this strange business on behalf of my friend, David Steel; indeed, but for Steel, I should probably have given you away to our friend Walker."

"But surely you guessed that——"

"Not for the moment. You see, it was only a few minutes before that a flood of interesting light had been let in upon Henson's character by your sister to me, and my idea was that Henson was poisoning you for some purpose of his own. Subsequently Steel told me all about that side of the story on our way back to Brighton."

"How did you penetrate my disguise?"

"My dear young lady, I have not penetrated your disguise. Your disguise is perfect—so quaint and daringly original—and would deceive even Henson's eyes. I guessed who you were directly I found that you were taking a philanthropic interest in our friend. It came to me by a kind of intuition, the knack that stood me in such good stead in my professional days. When you said that you had been warned of Henson's coming by telegram I was certain."

"Then perhaps you guessed that Enid sent me the telegram?"

"That was obvious. Also it was obvious that Henson brought Frank Littimer along."

"Oh, he did. It was Frank's mission to steal the picture. I confronted him with a revolver and locked him in one of the bedrooms. It took all my courage and good resolutions to prevent me from betraying myself to the poor fellow."

"Rather cruel of you, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes. But I wanted to make the exposure as complete as possible. When the time comes to strip Reginald Henson of his pretentions and flog him from the family, the more evidence we can pile up the better. But Frank is not bad; he is merely weak and utterly in the power of that man. If we can only break the bonds, Frank will be a powerful factor on our side."

"I daresay. But how was the Rembrandt stolen? Littimer's, I mean.

"It was worked through an accomplice," Chris explained. "It had to be done before you arrived. And there was no better time than night for the operation. I guessed that when Henson drew the fact from me that I liked the terrace after dinner. By a bit of good luck I found the acomplice and himself together in the day; in fact, I forced Reginald's hand so that he had to introduce me to a man."

"In which case you would know him again?"

"Of course. Presently I am going to show you a little more of the comedy. Well, I was on the terrace pretty late when I heard dear Reginald down the cliff calling for assistance. He pretended that he had slipped down the cliff and could not get up again. By the aid of a rope that fortunately happened to be close at hand I saved our dear friend's life. I have learnt from one of the gardeners just now that Reginald placed the rope there himself—a most effective touch, you must admit."

"Very," Bell said, drily. "But I quite fail to see why——"

"I am coming to that. Don't you see that if anything happened Reginald could prove that he was not near the house at the time? But just before that I saw his accomplice come up the cliff; indeed, he passed quite close to me on his way to the house. Reginald quite overlooked this fact in his heed for his own safety. When I had effected my gallant rescue I heard an owl hoot. Now, thre are no owls about here.

"I guessed what that meant—it was a signal of success. Then I went back to the corridor and the Rembrandt was gone. The stays had been cut away. At first I was dreadfully upset, but the more I thought of it the more sure I was that it was all for the best."

"But you might have raised an alarm and caught the thief, who——"

"Who would have been promptly disclaimed by Reginald. Let me tell you, sir, that I have the thief and the lost Rembrandt in the hollow of my hands. Before the day is out I shall make good my boast. And there's the breakfast bell."

It looked quite natural some time later for the three conspirators to be lounging about the gallery when Henson emerged from his bedroom. He appeared bright and smiling, and most of the bandages had been removed from his throat. All the same he was not pleased to see Bell there; he gazed uneasily at the doctor and from him to Littimer.

"You know Bell," the latter said, carelessly. "Fact is, there's been a great mistake."

Bell offered him his hand heartily. It cost him a huge effort, but the slimy scoundrel had to be fought with his own weapons. Henson shook his head with the air of a man extending a large and generous meed of forgiveness. He sought in vain to read Bell's eyes, but there was a steady, almost boyish, smile in them.

"I indeed rejoice," he said, unctuously. "I indeed rejoice—rejoice—rejoice!"

He repeated the last word helplessly, he seemed to have lost all his backbone, and lapsed into a flabby, jellified mass of quivering white humanity. His vacant, fishy eyes were fixed upon the Rembrandt in a kind of dull, sleepy terror.

"I'm not well," he gasped. "Not so strong as I imagined. I'll—I'll go and lie down again. Later on I shall want a dog-cart to drive me to Moreton Wells. I——"

He paused again, glanced at the picture, and passed heavily to his room. Littimer smiled.

"Splendid," he said. "It was worth thousands just to see his face."

"All the same," Chris said, quietly; "all the same, that man is not to leave for Moreton Wells till I've had a clear hour's start of him. Dr. Bell will you accompany me?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

Chris Has An Idea.

Lord Littimer polished his rarely used eye-glass carefully and favored Chris with a long, admiring stare. At the same time he was wondering why the girl should have taken such a vivid interest in Reginald Henson and his doings. For some years past it had been Littimer's whim to hold up Henson before everybody as his successor, so far as the castle went. He liked to see Henson's modest smirk and beautiful self-abasement, for in sooth his lordship had a pretty contempt for the man who hoped to succeed him. But the will made some time ago by Littimer would have come as a painful shock to the philanthropist.

"It is a very pretty tangle as it stands," he said. "Miss Lee, let me compliment you upon your astuteness in this matter. Only don't tell me you schemed your way here, and that you are a lady detective. I read a good many novels, and I don't like them."

"You may be easy on that score," Chris laughed. "I am not a lady detective. All the same, I have defeated Mr. Reginald Henson."

"You think he is at the bottom of the mystery of the other Rembrandt."

"I am certain of it; unless you like to believe in the truth of his charming scheme to give you a lesson, as he called it. As a matter of fact, Mr. Henson discovered the existence of the other print; he discovered that Dr. Bell possessed it—the rest I leave to you own astuteness. You saw his face just now?"

"Oh, yes. It was a fine study in emotions. If you could find the other picture——"

"I hope to restore it to you before the day has passed."

Littimer applauded, gently. He was charmed, he said, with the whole comedy. The first two acts had been a brilliant success. If the third was only as good he would regard Miss Lee as his benefactor for ever. It was not often that anybody intellectually amused him; in fact, he must add Miss Lee to his collection.

"Then you must play a part yourself," Chris said, gaily. "I am going into Moreton Wells, and Dr. Bell accompanies me. Mr. Henson is not to know that we have gone, and he is not to leave the house for a good hour or so after our departure. What I want is a fair start and the privilege of bringing a guest home to dinner."

"Vague, mysterious, and alluring," Littimer said. "Bring the guest by all means. I will pledge my diplomacy that you have a long start. Really, I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so much. You shall have the big waggonette for your journey."

"And join it beyond the lodge-gates," Chris said, thoughtfully. "Dr. Bell, you shall stroll through the park casually; I will follow as casually later on."

A little later Henson emerged from his room dressed evidently for a journey. He looked flabby and worried; there was an expression very like fear in his eyes. The corridor was deserted as he passed the place where the Rembrandt hung. He paused before the picture in a hesitating fascinated way. His feet seemed to pull up before it involuntarily.

"What does it mean?" he muttered. "What in the name of fate has happened? It is impossible that Merritt could have played me a trick like that; he would never have dared. Besides, he has too much to gain by following my instructions. I fancy——"

Henson slipped up to the picture as a sudden idea came to him. If the picture had not been removed at all the stays would still be intact. And if they were intact Merritt was likely to have a bad quarter of an hour later on. It would be proof that—

But the stays were not intact. The heads had been shaved off with some cutting instrument; the half of the stays gleamed like silver in the morning light. And yet the Rembrandt was there. The more, Henson dwelt upon it the more he was puzzled. He began to wonder whether some deep trap was being laid for him.

But, no, he had seen no signs of it. In some way or another Bell had managed to ingratiate himself with Littimer again, but not necessarily for long. Henson told himself, with a vicious grin. Nor was Littimer the kind of man who ever troubled himself to restrain his feelings. If he had got to the bottom of the whole business he would have had Henson kicked out of the house without delay.

But Littimer suspected nothing. His greeting just now showed that Bell suspected nothing, because he had shaken hands in the heartiest manner possible. And as for Miss Lee, she was no more than a smart Yankee girl, and absolutely an outsider.

Still, it was dreadfully puzzling. And it was not nice to be puzzled at a time when the arch-conspirator ought to know every move of the game. Therefore it became necessary to go into Moreton Wells and see Merritt without delay. As Henson crossed the hall the cheerful voice of Littimer hailed him.

"Reginald," he cried, "I want your assistance and advice."

With a muttered curse Henson entered the library. Littimer was seated at a table, with a cigarette in his mouth, his brows drawn over a mass of papers.

"Sit down and have a cigar," he said. "The fact is I am setting my affairs in order—I am going to make a fresh will. If you hadn't come down last night I should probably have sent for you. Now take my bank book and check these figures."

"Shall we be long?" Henson asked, anxiously.

Littimer tartly hoped that Henson could spare him an hour. It was not usual, he said, for a testator to be refused assistance from the chief benefactor under his will. Henson apologized, with a sickly smile. He had important business of a philanthropic kind in Moreton Wells, but he had no doubt that it could wait for an hour. And then for the best part of the morning he sat fuming politely, whilst Littimer chatted in the most amiable fashion. Henson had rarely seen him in a better mood. It was quite obvious that he suspected nothing. Meanwhile Chris and Bell were bowling along towards Moreton Wells. They sat well back in the roomy wagonette, so that the servants could not hear them. Chris regarded Bell with a brilliant smile on her face.

"Confess," she said, "confess that you are consumed with curiosity."

"It would be just as well to acknowledge it at once," Bell admitted. "In the happy old days your sister Enid always said that you were the clever and audacious one of the family. She said you would do or dare anything."

"I used to imagine so," Chris said, more quietly. "But the life of the last few years tries one's nerves terribly. Still, the change has done me a deal of good—the change and the knowledge that Reginald Henson regards me as dead. But you want to know how I am going to get the Rembrandt?"

"That is what is consuming me at present," Bell said.

"Well, we are going to see the man who has it," Chris explained, coolly. "I have his address in Moreton Wells at the present moment, and for the rest he is called the Rev. James Merritt. Between ourselves he is no more a reverend than you are."

"And if the genaleman is shy or refuses to see us?"

"Then he will be arrested on a charge of theft."

"My dear young lady, before you can get a warrant for that kind of thing, you have to prove the theft, you have to swear an information to the effect that you believe the property is in the possession of the thief, and that is not easy."

"There is nothing easier. I am prepored to swear that cheerfully."

"That you actually know that the property is in the possession of the thief?"

"Certainly I do. I saw him put it in his pocket."

Bell looked at the speaker with blank surprise. If such was the fact, then Chris' present statement was exactly opposed to all that she had said before. She sat opposite to Bell, with a little gleam of mischief in her lovely eyes.

"You saw that man steal the Rembrandt?" Bell gasped.

"Certainly not. But I did see him steal my big diamond star and put it in his pocket. And I can swear an information on that."

"I see you have something interesting to tell me," Bell said.

"Oh, indeed, I have. We will hark back now to the night before last, when Reginald Henson made his personal attempt to obtain the Rembrandt and then played the trick upon you that was so very near to being a brilliant success."

"It would have been but for you," Bell murmured.

"Well, really, I am inclined to think so. And perhaps Lord Littimer would have given you in custody on a second charge of theft. If he had done so it would have gone hard with you to prove your innocence. But I am wandering from the point. Henson failed. But he was going to try again. I watched him carefully yesterday and managed to see his letters and telegrams. Then I found that he had telegraphed to James Merritt, whose address in Moreton Wells I carefully noted down. It did not require much intellect to grasp the fact that this Merritt was to be the accomplice in the new effort to steal the picture. Mr. Merritt came over and saw his chief, with whom he had a long conversation in the grounds. I also forced myself on Mr. Merritt's notice.

"He was introduced to me as a brand plucked from the burning, a converted thief who had taken orders of some kind. He is a sorry-looking scoundrel, and I took particular note of him, especially the horrible smashed thumb."

"The what!" Bell exclaimed. "A thumb like a snake's head with a little pink nail on it?"

"The same man. So you happen to have met him?"

"We met on our way here," Bell said, drily. "The rascal sent the dogcart away from the station so that I should have to walk home, and he attacked me in the road. But I half expected something of the kind, and I was ready for him. And he was the man with the thumb. I should have told you all this before, but I had forgotten it in watching your fascinating diplomacy. When the attack was defeated the rascal bolted in the direction of the cliffs. Of course, he was off to tell Henson of the failure of the scheme and to go on with the plot of getting the other picture. If he had stolen my Rembrandt then the other would have remained. I couldn't have turned up with a cock-and-bull story of having started with the picture and being robbed of it by a total stranger in the road . . . . But I am interrupting you."

"Well, I marked that thumb carefully. I have already told you that the thief passed me on his way to the house when he came up the cliff. I was leaning over the terrace when I saw him emerge into a band of light caused by the big arc in the castle tower. I forgot that I was in deep shadow and that he could not possibly see me. I jerked my head back suddenly, and my diamond star fell out and dropped almost at the feet of the intruder. Then he saw it, chuckled over it—placed it in his pocket. I was going to call out, but I didn't. I had a sudden idea, Dr. Bell—I had an idea that almost amounted to an inspiration."

Chris paused for a moment and her eyes sparkled. Bell was watching her with the deepest interest and admiration.

"I let the man keep it," Chris went on, more slowly, "with an eye to the future. The man had stolen the thing and I was in a position to prove it. He would be pretty sure to pawn the star—he probably has done so by this time, and therefore we have him in our power. We have only to discover where the diamonds have been 'planted'—is that the correct expression?—I can swear an information, and the police will subsequently search the fellow's lodgings. When the search is made the missing Rembrandt will be found there. Mr. Merritt would hardly dare to pawn that."

"Even if he knew its real value, which I doubt," Bell said, thoughtfully. "Henson would not tell his tool too much. Let me congratulate you upon your idea, Miss Chris. That diamond star of yours is a powerful factor in our hands, and you always have the consciousness of knowing that you can get it back again. Now, what are we going to do next?"

"Going to call upon Mr. Merritt, of course," Chris said, promptly. "You forget that I have his address. I am deeply interested in the welfare of the criminal classes, and you are also an enthusiast. I've looked up the names of one or two people in the directory who go in for that kind of thing, and I'm going to get up a bazaar at Littimer Castle for the benefit of the predatory classes who have turned over a new leaf. I am particularly anxious for Mr. Merritt to give us an address. Dont you think that will do?"

"I should think it would do very well indeed," Bell said.

The quaint and somewhat exclusive town of Moreton Wells was reached in due course and the street where the Rev. James Merritt resided located at length. It was a modest two-storyed tenement, and the occupier of the rooms was at home. Chris pushed her way gaily in, followed by Bell, before the occupant could lay down the foul clay pipe he was smoking and button the unaccustomed stiff white collar round his throat. Merritt whipped a tumbler under the table with amazing celerity, but no cunning of his could remove the smell of gin that hung pungently on the murky atmosphere.

Merritt dodged his head back defiantly as if half expecting a blow. His eyes were strained a little anxiously over Bell's shoulder as if fearful of a shadow. Bell had seen the type before—Merritt was unconsciously looking for the police.

"I am so glad to find you at home," Chris said, sweetly.

Merritt muttered something that hardly sounded complimentary. It was quite evident that he was far from returning the compliment. He had recognised Bell, and was wondering fearfully if the latter was as sure of his identity. Bell's face betrayed nothing. All the same he was following Merritt's uneasy eye till it rested on a roll of dirty paper on the mantelshelf. That roll of paper was the missing Rembrandt, and he knew it.

"Won't you offer me a chair?" Chris asked, in the sweetest possible manner.

Merritt sulkily emptied a chair of a pile of cheap sporting papers, and demanded none too politely what business the lady had with him. Chris proceeded to explain at considerable length. As Merritt listened his eyes gleamed and a broadening grin spread over his face. He had done a great deal of that kind of thing, he admitted. Since Henson had taken him up the police had not been anything like so iniquisitive, and his present pose was fruitful of large predatory gains. The latter fact Merritt kept to himself. On the whole the prospect appealed to his imagination. Henson wouldn't like it, but then, Henson was not in a position to say too much.

"I thought perhaps if you came over with us and dined at the castle," Chris suggested. She spoke slowly and thoughtfully, with her eyes on the ground. "Say tonight. Will you come?"

Merritt grinned extensively once more. The idea of his dining at the castle appealed to his own peculiar sense of humour. He was at his ease, seeing that Bell failed to recognise him. To dine at the castle, to note the plate, and get a minute geographical knowledge of the place from personal observation! . . . His mouth watered at the thought.

"They ought to be more careful yonder," he suggested. "There's plate and there's pictures."

"Nothing has ever been stolen from Littimer Castle," Bell said, crisply. He read the leer in Merritt's eyes as he spoke of pictures. "Nothing whatever."

"What, not lately?" Merritt asked. "Didn't I hear tell of a——"

He paused, conscious of saying too much. Bell shook his head again. An utterly puzzled expression crept over Mr. Merritt's engaging countenance. At the present moment an art treasure of price stood in that very room, and here was a party from the castle utterly innocent of the robbery. Chris glanced at Bell and smiled.

"I love the pictures," she said, "especially the prints. That Rembrandt, 'The Crimson Blind,' for instance. I found a fresh light in it this morning and called Lord Littimer's attention to it before we started. I should lock that up if it were mine."

Merritt's eyes fairly bulged as he listened. He he not half-suspected some deep "plant" he would have been vastly amused. But then he had got the very picture these people were speaking about close to hand at the very moment.

"Tell you what," he said, suddenly. "I ain't used to swell society ways, but I'm always ready to sacrifice myself to the poor fellows who ain't found the straight path like me. And if you gets up your bazaar, I'll do what I can to 'elp."

"Then you will dine with us tonight?" Chris asked, eagerly. "Don't say no. I met a man once with a past like yours at Lady Roslingham's, and he was so interesting. We will call for you in an hour's time with the waggonette. Then we can settle half our plans before dinner."

Merritt was graciously pleased to be agreeable. Moreover, he was utterly puzzled and absolutely consumed with an overpowering curiosity. It seemed also to him to be a sheer waste of providence to discard such an offer. And the plate at Littimer Castle was superb!

Meanwhile Chris and Bell walked down the street together. "He was puzzled over the Rembrandt," Chris said. "Seeing that he has our picture——"

"No doubt about it. The picture was rolled up and stood on the mantelshelf. I followed Merritt's gaze, knowing perfectly well that it would rest presently on the picture if it was in the room. At the same time, our interesting friend, in chuckling over the way he has deceived us, clean forgot the yellow pawnticket lying on the table."

"Dr. Bell, do you mean to say that——"

"That I know where you diamond star was pledged. Indeed I do. Merritt had probably just turned out his pockets as we entered. The pawnticket was on the table and related to a diamond aigrette pawned by one James Merritt—mark the simple cunning of the man—with Messrs. Rutter & Co., 117 High Street. That in itself is an exceedingly valuable discovery, and one we can afford to keep to ourselves for the present. At the same time I should very much like to know what Rutter & Co., are like. Let me go down to the shop and make some simple purchase."

Rutter & Co. proved to be a very high class shop indeed, despite the fact that there was a pawnbroking branch of the business. The place was quite worthy of Bond street, the stock was brilliant and substantial, the assistants quite above provincial class. As Bell was turning over some sleeve-links, Chris was examining a case of silver and gold cigarette cases, and the like. She picked up a cigar case at length and asked the price. At the mention of fifty guineas she dropped the trifle with a little moue of surprise.

"It looks as if it had been used," she said.

"It is not absolutely new, madam," the assistant admitted, "therefore the price is low. But the gentleman who sold it to us proved that he had only had it for a few days. The doctor had ordered him not to smoke in future, and so——"

Chris turned away to something else. Bell completed his purchase, and together they left the shop. Once outside Chris gripped her companion's arm excitedly.

"Another great discovery," she said. "Did you see me looking at that cigar case—a gun metal one set with diamonds? You recollect that Ruth Gates purchased a case like that for that—that foolishness we thought of in connection with Mr. Steel. The case had a little arrow shaped scratch with the head of the arrow formed of the biggest diamond. Enid told me all this the night before I left Longdean Grange. Dr. Bell, I am absolutely certain that I have had in my hand just now the very case bought by Ruth from Lockhart's in Brighton!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

A Brilliant Idea.

Bell was considerably impressed with the importance of Chris' discovery, though at the same time he was not disposed to regard it in the light of a coincidence.

"It's a useful discovery in its way," he said; "but not very remarkable when you come to think of it. Somebody with an eye to damaging Steel changed that cigar case. How the change affected Steel you know as well as I do. But the cigar case purchased by Ruth Gates must be somewhere, and we are as likely to find it near Reginald Henson as anywhere else, seeing that he is at the bottom of the whole business. That change was made either by himself or by somebody at his instigation. Once the change was made he would not bother about the spare cigar case. His ally probably came here to see Henson; the latter as likely as not threw him over, knowing that the fellow would not dare to talk; hence the thing is turned into money. I am merely speculating, of course, under the assumption that you are quite sure of your facts."

"Absolutely," Chris cried, eagerly. "Two long, irregular scratches leading up in arrow-headed shape to the big diamond in the centre. Ruth told Enid all about that the very last time they discussed the matter together."

(To be continued.)