

The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

CHAPTER XXIX.

Chris gave Henson one swift searching glance before her eyes dropped demurely to the ground. Lord Littimer appeared to be taking no heed of anything but his own annoyance. But quick as Chris had been, Henson was quicker. He was smiling the slow, sad smile of the man who turns the other cheek because it is his duty to do so.

"And when does Dr. Bell arrive?" he asked.

"He won't arrive at all," Littimer said, irritably. "Do you suppose I am going to allow that scoundrel under my roof again? The amazing impudence of the fellow is beyond everything. He will probably reach Moreton Station by the ten o'clock train. The drive will take him an hour, if I choose to permit the drive, which I don't. I'll send a groom to meet the train with a letter. When Bell has read that letter he will not come here."

"I don't think I should do that," Henson said, respectfully.

"Indeed! You are really a clever fellow. And what would you do?"

"I should suffer Bell to come. As a Christian I should deem it my duty to do so. It pains me to say so, but I am afraid that I cannot contravert your suggestion that Bell is a scoundrel. It grieves me to prove any man that. And in the present instance the proofs were overpowering. But there is always a chance—a chance that we have misjudged a man on false evidence."

"False evidence! Why, the Rembrandt was actually found in Bell's portmanteau."

"Dear friend, I know it," Henson said, with the same slow, forgiving smile. "But there have been cases of black treachery, dark conspiracies that one abhors. And Bell might have made some stupendous discovery regarding his character. I should see him, my lord; oh, yes, I should most undoubtedly see him."

"And so should I," Chris put in, swiftly.

Littimer smiled, with all traces of his ill-temper gone. He seemed to be contemplating Henson with his head on one side, as if to fathom that gentleman's intentions. There was just the suspicion of contempt in his glance.

"In the presence of so much goodness and beauty I feel quite lost," he said. "Very well, Henson, I'll see Bell. I may find the interview diverting."

Henson stroled away with a sigh of gentle pleasure. Once out of sight he flew to the library, where he scribbled a couple of telegrams. They were carefully worded and related to some apocryphal parcel required without delay and calculated to convey nothing to the lay mind. A servant was dispatched to the village with them. Henson would have been anything but pleased had he known that the fascinating little American had waylaid his messenger and read his telegrams under the plea of verifying one of the addresses. A moment or two later and those addresses were carefully noted down in a pocket-book.

It was past five before Chris found herself with a little time on her hands again. Littimer had kept her pretty busy all the afternoon, partly because there was too much to do, but partly from the pleasure that he derived from his secretary's society. He was more free with her than he had been with any of her sex for years. It was satisfactory, too, to learn that Littimer regarded Henson as a smug and oily hypocrite, and that the latter was only going to be left Littimer Castle to spite the owner's other relations.

"Now you run into the garden and get a blow," Littimer said at length. "I am telling you a lot too much. I am afraid you are a most insinuating young person."

Chris ran out into the garden gaily despite the crushing burden on her shoulders she felt an elation and a flow of spirits she had not been conscious of for years. The invigorating air of the place seemed to have got into her veins, the cruel depression of the House of the Silent Sorrow was passing away. Again, she had hope and youth on her side, and everything was falling out beautifully. It was a pleasanter world than Chris had anticipated.

She went along more quietly after a time. There was a tiny arbour on a terrace overlooking the sea to which Chris had taken a particular fancy. She picked her way daintily along the grass paths between the roses until she suddenly emerged upon the terrace. She had popped out of the roses swiftly as a squirrel peeps from a tree.

Somebody was in the arbour, two people talking earnestly. One man stood up with his back to Chris, one hand gripping the outside ragged bark of the arbour frame with a peculiarly nervous, restless force. Chris could see the hand turned back distinctly. A piece of bark was being crumbled under a strong thumb. Such a thumb! Chris had seen nothing like it before.

It was as if at some time it had been smashed flat with a hammer, a broad, strong, cruel-looking thumb, flat and sinister-looking as the head of a snake. In the centre, like a pink pearl dropped in a filthy gutter, was one tiny, perfectly-formed nail.

The owner of the thumb stepped back the better to give way to a fit of hoarse laughter. He turned slightly aside and his eyes met those of Chris. They were small eyes set in a course, brutal face, the face of a criminal, Chris thought, if she were a judge of such matters. It came quite as a shock to see that the stranger was in clerical garb.

"I—I beg your pardon," Chris stammered. "But I—"

Henson emerged from the arbour. For once in a way he appeared confused, there was a flush on his face that told of annoyance ill suppressed.

"Please don't go away," he said. "Mr. Merritt will think that he has alarmed you. Miss Lee, this is my very good friend and co-worker in the field, the Reverend James Merritt."

"Is Mr. Merritt a friend of Lord Littimer's?" Chris asked, demurely.

"Littimer hates the cloth," Henson replied. "Indeed, he has no sympathy whatever with my work. I met my good friend quite by accident in the village just now, and I brought him here for a chat. Mr. Merritt is taking a well-earned holiday."

Chris replied graciously that she didn't doubt it. She did not deem it necessary to add that she knew that one of Mr. Henson's mystic telegrams had been addressed to one James Merritt at an address in Moreton Wells, a town some fifteen miles away. That the scoundrel was up to no good she knew perfectly well.

"Your work must be very interesting," she said. "Have you been in the Church long, Mr. Merritt?"

Merritt said hoarsely that he had not been in the Church very long. His dreadful grin and fog voice suggested that he was a brand plucked from the burning, and that he had only recently come over to the side of the angels. The whole time he spoke he never met Chris's glance once. The chaplain of a convict prison would have turned from him in disgust. Henson was obviously ill at ease. In his suave, diplomatic way he contrived to manoeuvre Merritt off the ground at length.

"An excellent fellow," he said, with exaggerated enthusiasm. "It was a great day for us when we won over James Merritt. He can reach a class which hitherto we have not touched."

"He looks as if he had been in gaol," Chris said.

"Oh, he has," Henson admitted, candidly. "Many a time."

Chris deemed it just possible that the unpleasant experience might be endured again, but she only smiled and expressed herself to be deeply interested. The uneasiness in Henson's manner gradually disappeared. Evidently the girl suspected nothing. She would have liked to have asked a question or two about Mr. Merritt's thumb, but she deemed it prudent not to do so.

Dinner came at length, dinner served in the great hall in honor of the recently arrived guest, and set up in all the panoply and splendor that Littimer affected at times. The best plate was laid out on the long table. There were banks and coppices of flowers at either corner, a huge palm nodded over silver and glass and priceless china. The softly shaded electric lights made pools of amber flame on fruit and flowers and gleaming crystal. Half-a-dozen big footmen went about their work with noiseless tread.

Henson shook his head playfully at all this show and splendor. His good humor was of the elephantine order, and belied the drawn anxiety of his eyes. Luxurious and peaceful as the scene was, there seemed to Chris to be a touch of electricity in the air, the suggestion of something about to happen. Littimer glanced at her admiringly. She was dressed in white satin, and she had in her hair a single diamond star of price.

"Of course, Henson pretends to condemn all this kind of thing," Littimer said. "He would have you believe that when he comes into his own plate and wine will be sold for the benefit of the poor, and the seats of the mighty filled with decayed governesses and antiquated shop-walkers."

"I hope that time may long be deferred," Henson murmured.

"And so do I," Littimer said, drily, "which is one of the disadvantages of being conservative. By the way, who was that truculent-looking scoundrel I saw with you this afternoon?"

Henson hastened to explain. Littimer was emphatically of opinion that such visitors were better kept at a distance for the present. When all the rare plate and treasures of Littimer Castle had been disposed of

for philanthropic purposes it would not matter.

"There was a time when the enterprising burglar got his knowledge of the domestic and physical geography of a house from the servants. Now he reforms, with the great advantage that he can lay his plan of campaign from personal observation. It is a much more admirable method, and tends to avert suspicion from the actual criminal."

"You would not speak thus if you knew Merritt," said Henson.

"All the same, I don't want the privilege," Littimer smiled. "A man with a face like that couldn't reform; nature would resent such an enormity. And yet you can never tell. Physically speaking, my quondam friend Hatherly Bell has a perfect face."

"I confess I am anxious to see him," Chris said. "I—I heard him lecture in America. He had the most interesting theory about dogs. Mr. Henson hates dogs."

"Yes," Henson said, shortly, "I do and they hate me, but that does not prevent my being interested in the coming of Dr. Bell. And nobody hopes more sincerely than myself that he will succeed in clearly vindicating his character."

Littimer smiled sarcastically as he trifled with his claret glass. In his cynical way he was looking forward to an interview with a certain sense of amusement. And there was a time when he had enjoyed Bell's society immensely.

"Well, you will not have long to wait now," he said. "It is long past ten, and Bell is due at any moment after eleven. Coffee in the balcony, please."

It was a gloriously warm night, with just a faint suspicion of a breeze on the air. Down below the sea beat with a gentle sway against the cliffs; on the grassy slopes a belated lamb was bleating for its dam. Chris strolled quietly down the garden with her mind at peace for a time. She had almost forgotten her mission for the moment. A figure slipped gently past her on the grass, but she utterly failed to notice it.

"An exceedingly nice girl, that," Littimer was saying, "and distinctly amusing. Excuse me if I leave you here—a tendency to argue and English night air don't blend together."

CHAPTER XXX.

It was the very moment that Henson had been waiting for. All his listlessness had vanished. He sprang to his feet and made his way hurriedly across the lawn. Dark as it was, he slipped along with the ease of one who is familiar with every inch of the ground. A man half his weight and half his age could have been no more active.

He advanced to what seemed to be the very edge of the cliff and disappeared. There were rocks and grassy knolls which served as landmarks to him. A slip of the foot might have resulted in a serious accident. Above the gloom a head appeared.

"That you, Merritt?" Henson asked, hoarsely.

"Oh, it's me right enough," came the muttered reply. "Good job as I'm used to a seafaring life or I should never have got up those cliffs. Where's the girl?"

"Oh, the girl's right enough. She's standing where she can near the cry of the suffering in distress. You can leave that part of the drama to me. She's a smart girl with plenty of pluck, but all the same I am going to make use of her. Have you got the things?"

"Got everything, partner. Got a proper wipe over the skull, too."

"How on earth did you manage to do that?"

"Meddling with Bell, of course. Why didn't you let him come and produce his picture in peace? We should have been all ready to flabbergaster him when he did come."

"My good Merritt, I have not the slightest doubt about it. My plans are too carefully laid for them to go astray. But, at the same time, I firmly believe in having more than one plan of attack and more than two ways of escape. If we could have despoiled Bell of his picture it would have been utterly useless for him to have come here. He would have gone back preferring to accept defeat to arriving with a cock-and-bull story to the effect that he had been robbed of his treasure on the way. And so he got the best of you, eh?"

"Rather! I fancied that I was pretty strong, but—well, it doesn't matter. Here I am with the tools, and I ain't going to fail this time. Before Bell comes the little trap will be ready and you will be able to prove an alibi."

Henson chuckled hoarsely. He loved dramatic effect, and here was one to hand. He almost fancied that he could see the white outline of Chris's figure from where he stood.

"Get along," he said. "There is no time to lose."

Merritt nodded and began to make his way upward. Some way above him Chris was looking down. Her quick ear had detected some suspicious sound. She watched eagerly. Just below her the big electric light on the castle tower cast a band of flame athwart the cliff. Chris looked down steadily at this. Presently she saw a hand uplifted into the belt of flame, a hand grasping for a ledge of rock, and a quickly stifled cry rose to her lips. The thumb on the hand was smashed flat, there was a tiny pink nail in the centre.

Chris's heart gave one quick leap, then her sense came back to her. She needed nobody to tell her that the owner of the hand was James

Merritt. Nor did she require any fine discrimination to perceive that he was up to no good. That it had something to do with the plot against Bell she felt certain. But the man was coming now, he could only reach the top of the cliffs just under the wall where she was standing. Chris peered eagerly down into the path of light until the intruder looked up. Then she jerked back, forgetting that she was in the darkness and absolutely invisible. The action was disastrous, however, for it shook Chris's diamond star from her head, and it fell gently almost at the feet of the climber. An instant later and his eyes had fallen upon it.

"What luck," he cried hoarsely. "I suppose that girl yonder must have dropped it over. Well, it is as good as a couple of hundred pound to me, anyway. Little missie, you'd better take a tearful farewell of your lumps of sugar, as you'll never see them again."

To Chris's quivering indignation he slipped the star into his breast-pocket. Just for the moment the girl was on the point of crying out. She was glad she had refrained a second after, for a really brilliant thought occurred to her. She had never evolved anything more clever in her life, but she did not quite realize that as yet.

Nearer and nearer the man with the maimed thumb came. Chris stepped back into the shadow. She waited till the intruder had slipped past her in the direction of the castle and prepared to follow at a discreet distance. Whatever he was after, she felt sure he was being ordered and abetted by Reginald Henson. Two minutes, five minutes, elapsed before she moved.

What was that? Surely a voice somewhere near her moaning for help. Chris stood perfectly still listening for the next cry. Her sense of humanity had been touched, she had forgotten Merritt entirely. Again the stifled cry for help came.

"Who are you?" Chris shouted.

"And where are you?"

"Henson," came the totally unexpected reply. "I'm down below on a ledge of rock. No, I'm not particularly badly hurt, but I dare not move."

Chris paused for a moment, utterly bewildered. Henson must have been on the look-out for his accomplice, she thought and had missed his footing and fallen. Pity he had not fallen a little farther, she murmured, bitterly, and broken his neck. But this was only for a moment, and her sense of justice and humanity speedily returned.

"I cannot see anything of you," she said.

"All the same I can see your outline," Henson said, dimly. "I don't feel quite so frightened now. I can hang on a bit longer, especially now, I know assistance is at hand. At first I began to be afraid that I was a prisoner for the night. No; don't go. If I had a rope I should have the proper confidence to swarm up again. And there is a coil of rope in the arbour close by you. Hang it straight down over that middle boulder and fasten your end round one of those iron pilasters."

The rope was there as Henson stated; indeed, he had placed it there himself. With the utmost coolness and courage Chris did as she was desired. But it took some little time to coax the rope to go over in the proper direction. There was a little mutter of triumph from below, and presently Henson, with every appearance of utter exhaustion, climbed over the ledge to the terrace. At the same moment an owl hooted twice from the long belt of trees at the bottom of the garden.

"I hope you are none the worse for your adventure?" Chris asked, politely.

Henson said sententiously that he fancied not. His familiarity with the cliffs had led him too far. If he had fallen on a ledge of rock goodness only knows what might have happened. Would Chris be so good as to lend him the benefit of her arm back to the castle? Chris was graciously willing, but she was full of curiosity at the same time. Had Henson really been in danger, or was the whole thing some part of an elaborate and cunning plot? Henson knew perfectly well that she had taken a great fancy to the upper terrace, and he might—

Really it was difficult to know what to think. They passed along slowly till the lights here and there from the castle shone on their faces. At the same time a carriage had driven up to the hall door and a visitor was getting out. With a strange sense of eagerness and pleasure Chris recognised the handsome features and misshapen shape of Hatherly Bell.

"The expected guest has arrived," Henson said.

There was such a queer mixture of snarling anger and exulting triumph in his voice that Chris looked up. Just for an instant Henson had dropped the mask. A ray of light from the open door streamed fully across his face. The malignant pleasure of it startled Chris. Like a flash she began to see how she had been used by those miscreants.

"He is very handsome," she contrived to say, steadily.

"Handsome is that handsome does," Henson quoted. "Let us hope that Dr. Bell will succeed in his mission. He has my best wishes."

Chris turned away and walked slowly as possible up the stairs. Another minute with that slimy hypocrite and she felt she must betray herself. Once out of sight she flew along the corridor and snapped up the electric light. She fell back

with a stifled cry of dismay, but she was more sorrowful than surprised. "I expected it," she said. "I knew that this was the thing they were after."

The precious copy of Rembrandt was no longer there!

(To be Continued.)

PURIFICATION OF WATER.

Kindly Offices of Sunlight, Aeration and Sedimentation.

That the water of lakes and rivers, even though infected with immense quantities of refuse materials, is purified spontaneously and after a certain time, if freed from all infection returns to its pristine condition, is now no longer disputed. What factors cause this purification, what part must be attributed to each, and what is the mechanism of each? The self-purification of water is much more easily accomplished when the foreign matter is broken up into small particles, this being determined by the velocity of the current, the condition of the bed of the river or lake, etc. When the particles are very small the molecular cohesion with the water is all the greater, while the separation of the matter multiplies the surface of contact of the particles with the liquid mass; surface for the nutrition of bacteria is also increased, these bacteria assuming the office of demolition of the foreign matter. A great number of bacteria, according to researches of Kruger and Frankland, are dragged to the bottom of the precipitation of the solid matter, in this way sedimentation playing an important role in the purification of water.

While it may be admitted that sedimentation is the principal factor of purification in sluggish streams, in swift currents the velocity itself is a purifying agent, carrying away all particles of matter which could cause infection. Also sunlight and temperature have an important role. It has been seen that bacteria may be destroyed in the water by sunlight even at a depth of three feet, while temperature has a very important influence, there being much fewer bacteria in the winter than in the summer. Many organisms have an action on the purification of water, namely, the bacteria of putrid fermentation, protozoa, molluscs, crustaceans, etc. All of these organisms grow better in impure water which must certainly destroy a notable of the impurities.

The part in purification which is assumed by dilution of the foreign matter is in relation to the mass of pure water and the character of the water sources, this action always increasing with distance from the source of contamination. Also the movement of the water, either in itself or by the aeration which is produced, has a powerful action on the purification of water.

NEW IRISH SECT.

Immersion in a River One of the Tenets of the Faith.

A new religious sect, described as the John the Baptist Pilgrims, has established itself in the north of Ireland, where it is making progress in the rural districts among the poorer countryfolk.

The founder is Edward Cooney, son of an Enniskillen merchant and justice of the peace. Always of a deeply sentimental and pious nature, he left home mysteriously a few months ago, and started an active propaganda of baptism by complete immersion in a river.

Already over 100 converts have been received within the fold by undergoing baptism in the prescribed form, through their influence it is expected that many more will join the Pilgrims.

The present meeting place is on the bank of the River Ballycaissy. After prayer, the leader and several of his disciples deliver addresses setting forth the principles of the new faith, which they defend with extracts from the Scriptures.

Attempts were made to break up the earlier meetings, but extra police were drafted in, and prevented any further disorder.

Entering a large barn, the male converts divest themselves of their ordinary apparel, for which they substitute old and worn clothing. The women went through a similar process in a house a short distance away.

After hymns had been sung a file of eight men came from the barn, all divested of outer clothing. The leader was the "celebrant," and he waded into the river followed by a man of middle age.

Having reached the centre of the stream the leader folded the convert's arms, placed his right hand on the man's chest, his left on the back of the shoulders, and gently lowered him backwards until the whole body was completely immersed.

He then raised the convert, who was assisted to the river bank by willing helpers. So the ceremony proceeded, to the evident discomfiture of some of the subjects.

Solomon knew but little when compared with what some men think they know.

If the good die young, what's the matter with the parson, who lives to a ripe old age?

The average man has no use for a chronic kicker—unless she is a ballet girl.