

The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

CHAPTER XXXI.

There were more sides to the mystery than David Steel imagined. It had seemed to him that he had pretty well all the threads in his hands, but he would have been astonished to know how much more Hatherly Bell and Enid Henson could have told him.

But it seemed to Bell that there was one very important thing to be done before he proceeded any farther. He was interested in the mystery as he was interested in anything where crime and cunning played a part. But he was still more intent upon clearing his good name; besides, this would give him a wider field of action.

In the light of recent discoveries it had become imperative that he should once more be on good terms with Lord Littimer. Once this was accomplished, Bell saw his way to the clearing up of the whole complication. It was a great advantage to know who his enemy was; it was a still greater advantage to discover that the hero of the cigarcase and the victim of the outrage in Steel's conservatory was the graceless scamp Van Sneek, the picture dealer, who had originally sold "The Crimson Blind" to Lord Littimer.

It was all falling out beautifully. Not only had Van Sneek turned up in the nick of time, but he was not in a position to do any further mischief. It suited Bell exactly that Van Sneek should be hors de combat for the moment.

The first thing to be done was to see Lord Littimer without delay. Bell had no idea of humbly soliciting an interview. He proceeded to a telegraph office the first thing the following morning and wired Littimer to the effect that he must see him on important business. He had an hour or two at his disposal, so he took a cab as far as Downend Terrace. He found Steel slug-hunting in the conservatory, the atmosphere of which was blue with cigarette smoke.

"So you are not working this morning?" he asked.
"How the dickens can I work?" David exclaimed, irritably. "Not that I haven't been trying. I might just as well take a long holiday till this mystery is cleared up for the good I am. What is the next move?"

"My next move is to go to Littimer and convince him that he has done me a great wrong. I am bound to have Littimer's ear once more."
"You are going to show him the spare Rembrandt, eh?"

"That's it. I flatter myself I shall astonish him. I've sent a telegram to say I'm coming to-day, after which I shall proceed to storm the citadel. I feel all the safer because nobody knows I have the engraving."
"My dear chap, somebody knows you have the picture."

"Impossible!" Bell exclaimed. "Only yourself and Enid Henson can possibly be aware that—"

"All the same, I am speaking the truth," David said. "Last night when you went into the hospital you gave me the print to take care of. At the same time I noticed a rough-looking man presumed asleep on the seat in the road facing the hospital. Afterwards when I looked round he had disappeared. At the time I thought nothing of it. When I came in here I placed the precious roll of paper on my writing-table under the window yonder. The window is a small one, as you can see, and was opened about a foot at the top. I sat here with the light down and the room faintly illuminated by the light in the conservatory. After a little time I saw a hand and arm groping for something on the table, and I'm quite sure the hand and arm were groping for your Rembrandt. The fellow muttered something that I failed to understand, and I made a grab for him and got him. Then the other hand made a dash for my head with an ugly piece of gas-piping, and I had to let go."

"And you saw no more of the fellow?"

"No; I didn't expect to. I couldn't see his face, but there was one peculiarity he had that I might tell you for your future guidance. He had a thumb smashed as flat as the head of a snake, with one tiny pink nail in the middle of it. So, if you meet a man like that on your journey to-day, look to yourself. On the whole, you see that our enemies are a little more awake than you give them credit for."

Bell nodded thoughtfully. The information was of the greatest possible value to him. It told him quite plainly that Reginald Henson knew exactly what had happened. Under ordinary circumstances by this time Henson would be on his way to Littimer Castle, there to checkmate the man he had so deeply injured. But fortunately Henson was laid by the heels, or so Bell imagined.

"I am really obliged to you," Bell said. "Your information is likely to be of the greatest possible service to me. I'm sorry you can't work."

"Don't worry about me," David said, grimly. "I'm gaining a vast quantity of experience that will be of the greatest value to me later on. Besides, I can go and compare notes with Miss Ruth Gates whilst you are away. She is soothing."

"So I should imagine," Bell said, drily. "No, I must be off. I'll let you know what happens at Littimer Castle. Good luck to you here."

And Bell bustled off. He was pleased to find a recent telegram of acceptance from Littimer awaiting him, and before five o'clock he was in the train for London. It was only after he left London that he began to crawl along. Thanks to slow local lines and a badly fitting cross service it was nearly eleven o'clock before he reached Moreton Station. It did not matter much, because Littimer had said that a carriage should meet him.

However, there was no conveyance of any kind outside the station. One sleepy porter had already departed, and the other one, who took Bell's ticket and was obviously waiting to lock up, deposited that a carriage from the castle had come to the station, but that some clerical gentleman had come along and countermanded it. Whereupon the dog-cart had departed.

"Very strange," Bell muttered. "What sort of a parson was it?"

"I only just saw his face," the porter yawned. "Dressed in black, with a white tie and a straw hat. Walked in a slouching kind of way with his hands down; new curate from St. Albans, perhaps. Looked like a chap as could take care of himself in a row."

"Thanks," Bell said, curtly. "I'll manage the walk; it's only two miles. Good-night."

Bell's face was grim and set as he stepped out into the road. He knew fairly well what this meant. It was pretty evident that his arch-enemy knew his movements perfectly well, and that a vigorous attempt was being made to prevent him reaching the castle. He called back to the porter.

"How long since the carriage went?" he asked.

A voice from the darkness said "Ten minutes," and Bell trudged on with the knowledge that one of his enemies at least was close at hand. That Reginald Henson was at the castle he had not the remotest idea. Nor did he fear personal violence. Despite his figure, he was a man of enormous strength and courage. But he had not long to wait.

Somebody was coming down the lonely road towards him, somebody in clerical attire. The stranger stopped and politely, if a little huskily, inquired if he was on the right way to Moreton Station. Bell responded as politely that he was, and asked to know the time. Not that he cared anything about the time; what he really wanted was to see the stranger's hands. The little ruse was successful. In the dim light Bell could see a flattened, hideous thumb with the pink parody of a nail upon it.

"Thanks, very much," he said, crisply. "Keep straight on."

He half turned as the stranger swung round. The latter darted at Bell, but he came too late. Bell's fist shot out and caught him fairly on the forehead. Then the stick in Bell's left hand came down with crushing force on the prostrate man's skull. So utterly dazed and surprised was he that he lay on the ground for a moment, panting heavily.

"You murderous ruffian," Bell gasped. "You escaped convict in an honest man's clothes. Get up! So you are the fellow—"

He paused suddenly, undesirous of letting the rascal see that he knew too much. The other man rolled over suddenly like a cat and made a dash for a gap in the hedge. He was gone like a flash. Pursuit would be useless, for pace was not Bell's strong point. And he was not fearful of being attacked again.

"Henson seems to be pretty well served," he muttered, grimly.

Meanwhile, the man with the thumb was flying over the fields in the direction of Littimer. He made his way across country to the cliffs with the assured air of one who knows every inch of the ground. He had failed in the first part of his instructions, and there was no time to be lost if he was to carry out the second part successfully.

He struck the cliffs at length a mile or so away, and proceeded to scramble along them till he lay hidden just under the terraces at Littimer Castle. He knew that he was in time for this part of the programme, despite the fact that his head ached considerably from the force and vigor of Bell's assault. He lay there, panting and breathing heavily, waiting for the signal to come.

Meanwhile, Bell was jogging along placidly and with no fear in his heart at all. He did not need anybody to tell him what was the object of his late antagonist's attack. He knew perfectly well that if the

ruffian had got the better of him he would never have seen the Rembrandt again. Henson's hounds were on the track; but it would go hard if they pulled the quarry down just as the sanctuary was in sight. Presently Bell could see the lights of the castle.

By the lodge-gates stood a dog-cart; in the flare of the lamps Bell recognised the features of the driver, a very old servant of Littimer's. Bell took in the situation at a glance.

"Is this the way you come for me, Lund?" he asked.

"I'm very sorry, sir," Lund replied. "But a clergyman near the station said you had gone another way, so I turned back. And when I got here I couldn't make top nor tail of the story. Bless if I wasn't a bit nervous that it might have been some plan to rob you. And I was going to drive slowly along to the station again when you turned up."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong," said Bell, cheerfully. "And I don't look as if I'd come to any harm. Anybody staying at the castle, Lund?"

"Only Mr. Reginald Henson, sir," Lund said, disparagingly.

Bell started, but his emotion was lost in the darkness. It came as a great surprise to him to find that the enemy was actually in the field. And how apprehensive of danger he must be to come so far with his health in so shattered a condition. Bell smiled to himself as he pictured Henson's face on seeing him once more under that roof.

"How long has Mr. Henson been here?" he asked.

"Only came yesterday, sir. Shall I drive you up to the house? And if you wouldn't mind saying nothing to his lordship about my mistake, sir—"

"Make your mind easy on that score," Bell said, drily. "His lordship shall know nothing whatever about it. On the whole, I had better drive up to the house. How familiar it all looks, to be sure."

A minute later and Bell stood within the walls of the castle.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Chris crossed the corridor like one who walks in a dream. She had not enough energy left to be astonished even. Her mind travelled quickly over the events of the past hour, and she began to see the way clear. But how had somebody or other managed to remove the picture? Chris examined the spot on the wall where the Rembrandt had been with the eye of a detective.

That part of the mystery was explained in a moment. A sharp cutting instrument, probably a pair of steel pliers with a lever attachment, had been applied to the head of the four stays, and the flat heads had been pinched off as clean as if they had been string. After that it was merely necessary to remove the frame and a child could have done the rest.

"How clever I am," Chris told herself, bitterly. "I'm like the astute people who put Chubb locks on Russia leather jewel-cases that anybody could rip open with a sixpenny penknife. And in my conceit I deemed the Rembrandt to be absolutely safe. Now what—what is the game?"

It was much easier to ask the question than to answer it. But there were some facts sufficiently obvious to Chris. In the first place she knew that Reginald Henson was at the bottom of the whole thing; she knew that he had traded on the fact that she had taken a fancy to the terrace as an after-dinner lounge, indeed, she had told him so earlier in the day. He had traded on the knowledge that he could prove an alibi if any suspicions attached to him. The fact that he was in danger owing to a slip on the edge of the cliff was all nonsense. He had not been in any danger at all; he had seen Chris there, and he had made all that parade with an eye to the future. As a matter of course, he was down there settling matters with his accomplice of the maimed thumb, who had chosen the cliff way of getting into the castle as the swiftest and the surest from detection.

Yes, it was pretty obvious that the man with the thumb had stolen the print, and that by this time he was far away with his possession. While Chris was helping Henson the latter's accomplice had slipped into the castle and effected the burglary. Chris flicked out the light in the alcove as a servant came along. It was not policy for any of the domestics to be too wise. Chris forced a smile to her face as the maid came along.

"Allen," she asked, "are there many owls about here?"

"Never a one as I know, miss," the maid responded, confidently. "I've been here for eleven years, and I never heard of such a thing. Clifford, the head keeper, couldn't sleep at nights if he thought as there was such a thing on the estate. Have you heard one, miss?"

"I was evidently mistaken," Chris said. "Of course you would know best."

So the cry of the owl had been a signal of success. Chris sat in the gloom there resolved to see the comedy played through. The events of the night were not over yet.

"I'd give something to know what has taken place in the dining-room," Chris murmured.

She was going to know before long. The lights were being extinguished all over the house. Henson came up to bed heavily, as one who is utterly worn out. At the same time he looked perfectly satisfied with himself. He might have been a vigilant officer who had settled all his plans and was going to seek a well-earned rest before the enemy came on to his destruction. In sooth Henson was utterly worn out. He had taxed his strength to the uttermost, but he was free to rest now.

Meanwhile, the conference in the dining-room proceeded. Lord Littimer had received his guest with frigid politeness, to which Bell had responded with an equally cold courtesy. Littimer laid his cigar aside and looked Bell steadily in the face. (To be Continued.)

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