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THE  
Crimson Blind

By FRED M. WHITE

Author of "Tregarten's Wife," "The Robe of Lucifer," Etc.

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"They dared not. They were fearful as to what might become of the reply."

"But they might have come to me openly."

"Again, they dared not for your sake. You know a great deal, David, but this is darkness and trouble and wickedness yet that I dare not speak of. And you are in danger. Already Reginald Henson has shown you what he can do."

"And yet he doesn't know everything," David said. "He may have stabbed me in the back, but he is quite ignorant as to what advice I gave to Edith Henson, which brings me back to the cigar-case. You saw me looking at it in Lockhart's. Go on."

"Yes, I watched you with a great deal of curiosity. Finally you went out of the shop saying that you could not afford to buy the cigar-case, and I thought no more of the matter for a time. Then we found out all about your private affairs. Oh, I am ashamed almost to go on."

"The dainty little face grew crimson; the hand in David's trembled."

"But we were desperate. And, after all, we were doing no harm. It was just then that the idea of the cigar-case came into my mind. We knew that if we could get you to take that money it would only be as a loan. I suggested the gift of the case as a memento of the occasion. I purchased that case with my own money and I placed it with its contents on the doorstep of your house."

"Did you watch it all the time?" "No, I didn't. But I was sufficiently near to hear your door open at the hour appointed. Of course, we had carefully rehearsed the telephone conversation, and I knew exactly what to do."

"David sat very thoughtfully for some little time."

"The case must have been changed," he said. "It is very difficult to say now, but there is no other logical solution of the matter. At about half-past twelve on that eventful night you placed on my doorstep a sun-metal cigar-case, mounted in diamonds, that you had purchased from Lockhart's?"

"Yes, and the very one that you admired. Of that I am certain."

"Very well, I take that case with me to 218, Brunswick Square, and I bring it back again. Did I take it with me?" "No, I didn't. It was found on the floor beside the body. It never passed out of my possession to my knowledge. Next day I leave it at the office of Messrs. Mosses and Mack, and it gets into the hands of the police."

"Was it not possibly changed there, David?"

"No, because of the initials I had scratched inside it. And beyond all question that case—the same case, mind you, that I picked up on my doorstep—was purchased by the man now lying in the hospital here from Watson's in West Street. Now, how was the change made?"

"If I could only see my way to help you!"

"The change was made the day you bought the case. By the way, when was it?"

"I can't tell you the exact time," Ruth replied. "It was on the morning of the night of your adventure."

"And you kept it by you all the time?"

"Yes. It was in a little box sealed with yellow wax and tied with yellow string. I went to 218 after I had made the purchase. My uncle was there and he was using the back sitting-room as an office. He had brought a lot of papers with him to go through."

"Ah! Did you put your package down?"

"Just for a moment on the table. But surely my uncle would not—"

"One moment, please. Was anybody with your uncle at the time?"

"Ruth gave a sudden little cry. "How senseless of me to forget," she cried. "My uncle was down merely for the day, and as he was very busy, he left his key to the man who had helped him, did not he, that Mr. Henson would know anything. But even now I cannot see what—"

"Again let me interrupt you. Did you leave the room at all?"

"Yes. It is all coming back to me now. My uncle's medicine was locked up in a box. He asked me to go for it and I went, leaving my package on the table. It is all coming back to me now. When I returned Mr. Henson was quite alone, as somebody had called to see my uncle. Mr. Henson seemed surprised to see me back so soon, and as I entered he crushed something up in his hand and dropped it into the waste-paper basket. But my parcel was quite intact."

"Yellow wax and yellow string and all?"

Henson and Bell. Have they ever met under your roof?"

"No," Ruth replied. "Henson has always alluded to Dr. Bell as a lost man. He professes to be deeply sorry for him, but he has declined to meet him. Where are you going?"

"I am going with you to see if we can find anything in the waste-paper basket on No. 218. Bell tells me that your servants have instructions to touch no papers, and I know that the back sitting-room of your house is used as a kind of office. I want, if possible, to find the paper that Henson tried to hide on the day you bought the cigar-case."

"The basket proved to be a large one, and was partially filled with letters that had never been opened—begging letters, Ruth said. For half an hour David was engaged in smoothing out crumpled sheets of paper, until at length his search was rewarded. He held a packet of note-paper, the usual six sheets, one inside the other, that generally go to correspondence sheets of good quality. It was crushed up, but Steel detached it out and held it up for Ruth's inspection."

"Now, here is a find!" he cried. "Look at the address in green at the top of '15, Downland Terrace.' Five sheets of my own best note-paper, printed especially for myself, in this basket! Originally this was a block of ten sheets, but the one has been written upon and the others crushed up like this. Beyond doubt the paper was stolen from my study. And—what's this?"

"He held up the thick paper to the light. At the foot of the top sheet was plainly indented in outline the initials 'D. S.'"

"My own cipher," David went on. "Scrawled in so boldly as to mark on the under sheet of paper. Almost invariably I use initials instead of my full name unless it is quite formal business."

"And what is to be done now?" Ruth asked.

"Find the letter forged over what looks like a genuine cipher," David said, grimly.

## CHAPTER XXII.

Bell followed Dr. Cross into the hospital with a sense of familiar pleasure. The cool, sweet smell of the place, the decorous silence, the order of it all appealed to him strongly. It was as if he had stepped into a room that he had known for years, and who sniffs the battle from afar. And the battle with death was ever a joy to Bell.

"This is all contrary to regulations, of course," he suggested.

"Well, it is," Cross admitted. "But I am an enthusiast, and I do not often get a chance of chatting with a brilliant, erratic star like yourself. Besides, our man is not in the hospital proper. He is in a kind of annex by my own quarters, and he scoffs the suggestion of being nursed."

Bell nodded, understanding perfectly. He came at length to a brilliantly lighted room where a dark man with an exceedingly high forehead and wonderfully piercing eyes was sitting up in bed. The dark eyes lighted with pleasure as they fell upon Bell's queer, shambling figure and white hair.

"The labor we delight in," he said, "is a good deal of a laugh and a groan. It's worth a badly twisted shoulder to have the pleasure of seeing Hatherly Bell again. My dear fellow, how are you?"

"The voice was low and pleasant. There was no trace of insanity about the speaker. Bell shot the proffered hand. For some little time the conversation proceeded smoothly enough. The stranger was a good talker; his remarks were keen and to the point."

"I hope you will be comfortable here," Bell suggested.

A faint subtle change came over the other's face.

"All but one thing," he whispered. "Don't make a fuss about it, because Cross is very kind. But I can't stand the electric light. It reminds me of the great tragedy of my life. But for the electric light I should be a free man with a good practice to-day."

"So you are harping on that string again," Bell said, coldly. "I fancied that I had argued you out of that. You know perfectly well that it is all imagination, Hatherly."

Heritage passed his hand across his eyes in a confused kind of way.

"When you look at one like that I fancy so," he said. "When I was under your hands I was forgetting all about it. And now it has all come back again. Did I tell you all about it, Cross?"

Bell gave Cross a slight glance, and the latter shook his head.

"Well, it was this way," Heritage began, eagerly. His eyes were gleaming now, his whole aspect was changed.

"I was poor and struggling, but I had a grand future before me. There was a patient of mine, a rich man, who had a deadly throat trouble. And he was willing to leave me all his money if I could cure him. He had done so. And I was in dire straits for some ready cash. When I came to operate I used an electric light, a powerful light."

"You know what I mean. The operation failed because the electric light went out at a critical time."

"People said it was a great misfortune for me, because I was on the threshold of a new discovery which would have made my name. Nothing of the kind. I deliberately cut the positive wire of the electric light so that I

should fail, and so that my patient might die and I might get all his money at once. And he did die, and nobody suspected me—nobody could possibly have found me out. Then I went mad and they put me under Bell's care. I should have got well, only he gave up his practice and drifted into the world at large. My good friend Reginald Henson heard of my case; he interested some people in me and placed me where I am at present."

"So Reginald Henson knows all about it?" Bell asked, drily.

"My dear fellow, he is the best friend I have in the world. He was most interested in my case. I have gone over it with him a hundred times. I showed him exactly how it was done. And now you know why I loathe the electric light. When it shines in my eyes it maddens me; it brings back to me the recollection of that dreadful time, it causes me to—"

"Heritage," Bell said, sternly, "close your eyes at once, and be silent."

The patient obeyed instantly. He had not forgotten the old habit of obedience. When he opened his eyes again at length he looked at him in a foolish, shame-faced manner.

"I—I am afraid I have been rambling," he muttered. "Pray don't notice me, Bell; if you are as good a fellow as you used to be, come and see me again, I'm tired now."

Bell gave the desired assurance, and he and Cross left the room together.

"Any sort of truth in what he has been saying?" asked the latter.

"Very little," Bell replied. "Heritage is an exceedingly clever fellow. He has not yet recovered from the shock of his cure. He has been nearly cured him at one time, but he seems to have lapsed into bad ways again. Some day, when I have time, I shall take up his case once more."

"Did he operate, or try some new throat cure?"

"He was on the verge of discovering some way of operating for throat cases with complete success. You can imagine how excited he was over his discovery. Unfortunately the patient he experimented on died under the operation, not because the light was out, but because of some kind of error, but from failure of the heart's action owing to excitement. Heritage had no sleep for a fortnight, and he broke down altogether. For months he was really mad, and when his senses came back to him he had a hallucination. Some day it will go, and some day Heritage will take up the dropped threads of his discovery and the world will be all the better for it. And now, will you do me a favor?"

"I will do anything that lies in my power."

"Then be good enough to let me have a peep at the man who was found half-murdered in my friend David Steel's conservatory. I'm interested in that case."

Cross hesitated for a moment.

"All right," he said. "I can't say any harm in that. Come this way."

Bell strode along with the air of a man who is moved by no more than ordinary curiosity. But from the first he had made up his mind not to lose this opportunity. He had not the remotest idea what he expected to find, but he had a pretty good idea that he was on the verge of an important discovery.

He came at length to the bedside of the mysterious stranger. The man was lying on his back in a state of coma, his breath came heavily between his parted lips.

Bell bent low partly to examine the patient, partly to hide his face from Cross. If Bell had made any discovery he kept the fact rigidly to himself.

"Looks very young," he muttered.

"But then he is one of those men who never grow any hair on their faces. You see, he looks like a child, but he is at least forty-five, and if I am not mistaken, he is a man who has heard the chimes at midnight or later. I'm quite satisfied."

"It's more than I am," Cross said, when at length he and his visitor were standing outside. "Look here, Bell, you're a great friend of Steel's, whom I believe to be a very good fellow. I don't want to get him into any harm, but a day or two ago I found this letter in a pocket-book in a belt worn by our queer patient. Steel says the fellow is perfectly sane, and I believe that statement. But what about this letter? I ought to have sent it to the police, but I didn't. Read it."

And Cross proceeded to take a letter from his pocket. It was on thick paper; the stamped address given was "15, Downland Terrace." There was no heading, merely the words "Certainly, with pleasure, I shall be home; in fact, I am home every night till 12.30, and you may call any time up till then. If you knock quietly on the door I shall hear you—D.S."

"What do you make of it?" Cross asked.

"It looks as if your patient had called at Steel's house by appointment," Bell admitted. "Here is the invitation undoubtedly in Steel's handwriting. Subsequently the poor fellow is found in Steel's house nearly murdered, and yet Steel declares solemnly that the man is a perfect stranger to him. It is a bad business, but I assure you that Steel is the soul of honor. Cross, would you be so good as to let me have that letter for two or three days?"

"Very well," Cross said, after a little hesitation. "Good-night."

Bell went on his way homeward with plenty of food for thought.

He stopped just for a moment to light a cigar.

"Getting towards the light," he muttered. "Getting along. The light is not going to fall after all. I wonder what Reginald Henson would say if he only knew that I had been to the hospital and recognized our mutual friend Van Sneek there?"

## CHAPTER XXIII.

The expression on Henson's usually benign countenance would have startled such of his friends and admirers as regarded him as a shining light and great example. The smug satisfaction, the unctuous sweetness of the expansive blue eyes were gone; a murderous gleam shone there instead. His lips were set and rigid, the strong hand seemed to be straining the bedclothes. It wanted no effort of imagination to picture Henson as the murderer stooping over his prey. The man had discarded his mask altogether.

"Oh," he said, between his teeth, "you are a clever fellow. You would have made an excellent detective. And so you have found out where Van Sneek is?"

"I have already told you so," Littler said, doggedly.

"How many days have you been hanging about Brisbane?"

"Two or three. I came within a reach of that Chris was ill. I didn't dare to come near the house, at least not too near, for fear of being seen. But I pumped the doctor. Then he told me that Chris was dead, and I risked it all to see the last of her."

"Yes, yes," Henson said, testily; "but what has this to do with Van Sneek?"

"I was looking for Van Sneek. I found that he had been here. I discovered that he had left his rooms and had not returned to them. Then it occurred to me to try the hospital. I pretended that I was in search of some missing relative, and they showed me."

"He had not been identified. And the third was Van Sneek."

Littler told his story with just the suggestion of triumph in his voice. Henson was watching him with the keenest possible interest.

"Do you know how Van Sneek got there?" he asked.

Littler nodded. Evidently he had heard most of the story. Henson was silent for some little time. He was working out something in his mind. His smile was not a pleasant one; it was nothing like his bland platform smile, for instance.

"Give me that black book," he said. "Do you know how to work the telephone?"

"I daresay I could learn. It doesn't look hard."

"Well, that is an extension telephone on the table yonder worked in connection with the main instrument in the library. I like to have my own telephone, as it is of the greatest assistance to me. Turn that handle two or three times and put that receiver to your ear. When the Exchange answers tell them to put you on to 0,17 Gerard."

Littler obeyed mechanically, but though he rang and rang again no answer came. With a snarling curse Henson dragged himself out of bed and crossed the room with limbs that shook under him.

He twirled the hand round passionately.

"You always were a fool," he growled, "and you always will be."

Still no reply came. Henson whistled angrily, but he elicited no response. He kicked the instrument over and danced round it impatiently. Littler had never seen him in such a raging fury before. The language of the man was an outrage, filthy, revolting, profane. No yelling, drunken Hoegaarden could have been more fluent, more luridly diffuse.

"Go on," Littler said, bitterly. "I like to hear you. I like to hear the smug, plausible Pharisee, the friend of the good and pious, going on like this. I'd give fifty years of my life to have you say a word that would hurt me."

Henson paused suddenly and requested that Littler should help him into bed.

"I can afford to speak freely before you," he said. "Say a word against me and I'll wipe you off the face of the earth. It's absolutely imperative that I should send an important telephone message to London at once, and here the machine has broken down and no chance of its being repaired for a day or two. Curse the telephone. I lay back on the bed and uttered exhausted by his fit of passion. One of the white bandages about his throat had started, and a little thin stream of blood trickled down his chest. Littler waited for the next move. He watched Henson fumble with the bandage, and he saw the big scoundrel bleeding to death with the greatest possible pleasure."

"What was Van Sneek doing here?"

The voice came clear and sharp from the bed. Littler responded to it as a young man does to a sudden yell. He quite unexpected lash from a huntsman's whip. His manliness was of small account where Henson was concerned. For years he had come to heel like this. Yet the question startled him and took him entirely by surprise.

"He was looking for the lost Rembrandt."

But Littler's surprise was as nothing to Henson's amazement. He lay flat on his back so that his face could not be seen. From the expression of it he had obtained a totally unexpected reply to his question. He was so amazed that he had no words for the moment. But his quick intelligence and amazing cunning grasped the possibilities of the situation. Littler was in possession of information to which he was a stranger. Except in a vague way he knew nothing of the matter. What Littler was talking about. But the younger man must not know that.

"So Van Sneek told you so?" he asked. "What a fool he must have been! And why should he come seeking for the Rembrandt in Brighton?"

"Because he knows it was there, I suppose."

"It isn't there, because it doesn't exist. The thing was destroyed by accident by the police when they raided Van Sneek's lodgings years ago."

"Van Sneek told me that he had actually seen the picture in Brighton. He was so amazed that he had no words for the moment. But his quick intelligence and amazing cunning grasped the possibilities of the situation. Littler was in possession of information to which he was a stranger. Except in a vague way he knew nothing of the matter. What Littler was talking about. But the younger man must not know that."

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Reverend Felix Cross, and you put the money into your pocket. A certain weekly journal exposed you, and you had to leave suddenly or you would have found yourself in the hands of the police. You skipped so suddenly that you had no time even to think of your personal effects, which you understood were sold to defray expenses. But they were not sold, as nobody cared to throw good money after bad. Van Sneek got in with the agent under pretence of viewing the house, and he saw the picture there."

"Why didn't he take it with him?" Henson asked, with amused scorn. He was master of himself again and had his nerves well under control.

"Well, that was hardly like Van Sneek. His friend is nothing if not diplomatic. But when he did manage to get into the house again the picture was gone."

"Excellent!" Henson cried. "How dramatic! There is only one thing required to make the story complete. The picture was taken away by Hatherly Bell. If you don't bring that in as the denouement I shall be utterly disappointed."

"You needn't be," Littler said, coolly. "That is exactly what did happen."

Henson chuckled again, quite a parody of a chuckle this time. He could detect the quiet suggestion of triumph in Littler's voice.

"Did Van Sneek tell you all this?" he asked.

"Not the latter part of it," Littler replied, "seeing that he was in the hospital when it happened. But I know it is true because I saw Bell and David Steel, the novelist, come away from the house, and Bell had the picture under his arm. And that's why Van Sneek's agent couldn't find it in the end. He went to check to you, my friend, at any rate. Bell will go to my father with Rembrandt number two, and compare it with number one. And then the fat will be in the fire."

Henson yawned affectedly. All the same he was terribly disturbed and shaken. All he wanted now was to be alone and to think. So far as he could tell nobody besides Littler knew anything of the matter. And no starved, cowed, broken-hearted puppy was ever closer under the heel of his master than Littler. He still held all the cards, he still controlled the fortunes of two ill-starred houses.

"You can leave me now," he said. "I'm tired. I have had a trying day, and I need sleep; and the sooner you are out of the house the better. For your own sake and for the sake of those about you, you had best say one word to this old Hatherly."

Littler promised meekly enough. With those eyes blazing upon him he would have promised anything. He shall see presently what a stupendous terror Henson had over the younger man, and in what way all the sweetness and savour of life was being crushed out of him.

He closed the door behind him, and immediately Henson sat up in bed. He reached for his handkerchief and wiped the big beads from his forehead.

"So the danger has come at last," he muttered. "I am face to face with it, and I know I should be. Hatherly Bell is not the man to quietly lie down under a cloud like that. The man has brains, and patience, and indomitable courage. Now, does he suspect that I have any hand in this matter? I must try and get at the truth. If he goes to Lord Littler with that picture he shakes my power and my position seriously. What a fool I was not to get it away. But then, I only escaped from the Brighton police in those days by the skin of my teeth. And they had followed me from Huddersfield like those cursed bloodhounds here. I wonder—"

He paused, as the brilliant outline of some cunning scheme occurred to him. A thin, cruel smile crept over his lips. Never had he been in a tighter place yet without discovering a loophole of escape almost before he had seen the trap.

A fit of noiseless laughter shook him.

"Splendid," he whispered. "Worthy of Machiavelli himself! Provided always that I can get there first. If I could only see Bell's face afterwards, hear Littler ordering him off the premises. The only question is, am I up to seeing the thing through?"

## CHAPTER XXIV.

Reginald Henson struggled out of bed and into his clothing as best he could. He was terribly weak and shaky, far more weak than he had imagined himself to be, but he was in danger now, and his indomitable will-power pulled him through. What a fool Littler had been to tell him so much merely so that he might triumph over his powerful foe for a few minutes. But Henson was planning a little scheme by which he intended to repay the young man tenfold. He had no doubt as to the willingness of his tool.

He took a bottle or cranny from a drawer and helped himself to a liberal dose. Walker had expressly forbidden anything of the kind, but it was no (To be continued)

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FOR BRUISES,  
FOR RHEUMATISM,  
FOR CONSTIPATION,  
FOR SALLOW SKIN,  
FOR THE COMPLEXION.

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FOR DIZZINESS,  
FOR BRUISES,  
FOR RHEUMATISM,  
FOR CONSTIPATION,  
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FOR THE COMPLEXION.

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