

A New Orleans woman was thin. Because she did not extract sufficient nourishment from her food. She took Scott's Emulsion. Result: She gained a pound a day in weight.

THE Crimson Blind

By FRED M. WHITE

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

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Follow me to the gallery, if you haven't forgotten the

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.

Nothing until the alcove was reached, and then he drew back in the shadow to let the others pass.

"Now 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 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 barefaced 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 infernal 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 she 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.

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 impossible situation about was calmly enjoying her 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.

"Come," 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 hastily 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 tenacity 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," Littimer cried.

"Foolish," 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 your 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. She couldn't have had your picture two nights ago, could it? 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 some-thing else was smouldering in his eyes. "Tell me you showed the thing to my wife

"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 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 anger 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 Belmont'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 that 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 my picture to prevent anything like this robbery. I made the stays secure 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 pleasure of the man to do things openly," Chris went on. "I know more about the man than you do, my lord. He is a man to be kept 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 kind, if you please, does not come here on foot 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 prevent the other from being traced. He has brought about. But he could not steal the picture because it was fast."

"You are a 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, coolly. "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 I am interested in the Rembrandt. He has greatly injured someone I care for deeply. Well, I fasten 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 nodded 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 him, you would have been crestfallen. 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 extend at present."

"I dare say 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 name, 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 onto

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 also 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 doubts 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 is."

"Might stay for ages," Littimer exclaimed. "By Jove, I'm just in the mood to carry this business a stage or farther before I go to bed. If 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 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 school-boy 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 Wiscaree, seeing that we have the frame, perhaps you will fulfil the 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 it to that you could not see 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 you 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.

Chris 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 shall 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 do not speak in this fashion as before. There is only one other thing."

"Name it, and it is yours," 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 it. I would not miss it for a strawberry leaved."

"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 was 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 an 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 myself. 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 Chris'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 client 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 first 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 do 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 said 'That was obvious. Also it was ob-

vious.' 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 pretensions and to fog him from the family, the more evidence I 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 dare say. But how was the Rembrandt stolen?" Littimer asked.

"It was stolen by the thief. I mean, 'I don't know,' 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 accomplice and himself together in the day; in fact, I forced Reginald's hand so that he had to introduce me to the man."

"In which case you would know him again?"

"Of course. Presently I am going to show you a little more of the conspiracy. Well, I was on the terrace, and 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 first to last the whole of the plot. That Reginald placed the rope there himself—a most effective touch, you must admit."

"Very," Bell said, drily. "But I quite fall 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 the plot. When I had effected my gallant rescue I heard the owl hoot. Now, there 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 thief has been cut away. At this I was greatly pleased, 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, I was ready to do it. When I lost the 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 two 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 silly scoundrel had to be fought with him now and then. He was not to be trifled with. Henson took his hand 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 go and lie down again. Later on I shall want a dogcart to drive me to Moreton Wells."

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.

Lord Littimer polished his rarely used eye-glasses 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 the path of his life 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 he had 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 your judgment. 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. I shall be delighted, 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 have Miss Lee in his collection."

"Then you must play a part yourself," Chris said, gaily. "I am going to steal the picture. I am going to accompany 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 trial 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 wagonette 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 me."

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 head 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 those figures."

"Sit down, my lord," Henson said, anxiously. "Littimer tarty hoped that Henson could spare him an hour. It was not usual, he said, for a testator to be refused assistance from the chief beneficiary under his will. Henson apologized, with a sticky 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 chattered 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 tried one's nerves terribly. Still, the change has done me a deal of good—no change and the know-ledge that Reginald Henson regards me as dead. But you want to know how I am going to get the Rembrandt?"

(To be Continued)

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