The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

CHAPTER I.—Cont.

"Everything. I am trying to save you from ruin. Fortune has played you into my hands. I am perfectly aware that if you were not on the verge of social extinction you would refuse my request. It is in your hands to decide. You know that Beckstein, your creditor, is absolutely merciless. He will get his money back and more besides. This is his business. To-morrow you will be an outcast—for the time, at any rate. Your local creditors will be insolent to you; people will pity you or blame you, as their disposition lies. On the other hand, you have to say the word and you are saved. You can go and see the Brighton representatives of Beckstein's lawyers, and pay them in paper of the Bank of England."

"If I was assured of your bona-fides," Steel murmured.

A queer little laugh, a laugh of triumph, came over the wires.

"I have anticipated that question. Have you Greenwich time about you?"

Steel responded that he had. It was five-and-twenty minutes past twelve. He had quite ceased to wonder at any questions put to him now. It was all so like one of his brilliant little extravaganzas.

"You can hang up your receiver for five minutes," the voice said. "Precisely at half-past twelve you go and look on your front doorstep. Then come back and tell me what you have found. You need not fear that I shall go away."

Steel hung up the receiver, feeling that he needed a little rest. His cigarette was actually scorching his thumb and forefinger, but he was heedless of the fact. He flicked up the dining-room lights again and rapidly made himself a sparklet soda, which he added to a small whiskey. He looked almost lovingly at the gleaming Cellini tankard, at the pools of light on the fair damask. Was it possible that he was not going to lose all this, after all?

The Moorish clock in the study droned the half-hour.

David gulped down his whisky and crept shakily to the front door with a feeling on him that he was doing something steathily. The bolts and chain rattled under his trembling fingers. Outside, the whole world seemed to be sleeping. Under the wide canopy of stars some black object picked out with shining points lay on the white marble breadth of the top step. A gun-metal cigar-case set in tiny diamonds.

The novelist fastened the front door and staggered to the study. A pretty, artistic thing such as David had fully intended to purchase for himself. He had seen one exactly like it in a jeweller's window in North Street. He had pointed it out to his mother. Why, it was the very one! No doubt whatever about it. David had had the case in his hands and had reluctantly declined the purchase.

He pressed the spring, and the case lay open before him. Inside were papers, soft, crackling papers; the case was crammed with them. They were white and clean, and twenty-five of them in all. Twenty-five Bank of England notes for £10 each—£250!

David fought the dreamy feeling off and took down the telephone receiver.

"Are you there?" he whispered, as if fearful of listeners. "I—I have found your parcel."

"Containing the notes. So far so good. Yes, you are right, it is the same cigar-case you admired so much in Lockhart's the other day. Well, we have given you an instance of our bona-fides. But £250 is of no use to you at present. Beckstein's people would not accept it on account—they can make far more money by 'selling you up,' as the poetic phrase goes. It is in your hands to procure the other £750 before you sleep. You can take it as a gift, or, if you are too proud for that, you may regard it as a loan. In which case you can bestow the money on such charities as commend themselves to you. Now are you going to place yourself entirely in my hands?"

Steel hesitated no longer. Under the circumstances few men would, as he had a definite assurance that there was nothing dishonorable to be done. A little courage, a little danger, perhaps, and he could hold up his head before the world; he could return to his desk te-morrow with the passion flowers over his head and the scent groves sweet to his nostrils. And the mater could dream happily, for there would be no sadness or sorrow in the morning.

"I will do exactly what you tell me," he said.

"Spoken like a man," the voice cried. "Nobody will know you have left the house—you can be home in an hour. You will not be missed. Come, time is getting short and I have my risks as well as others. Go at once to Old Steine. Stand on the path close under the shadow of the statue of George IV. and wait there. Somebody will say 'Come,' and you will follow. Good-night."

Steel would have said more, but the tinkle of his own bell told him that the stranger had rung off. He laid his cigar-case on the writing-table, slipped hs cigarette-case into his pocket, satisfied himself that he had his latch-key, and put on a dark overcoat. Overhed the dear old mater was sleeping peacefully. He closed the front door carefully behind him and strode resolutely into the darkness.

CHAPTER II.

David walked swiftly along, his mind in a perfect whirl. Now that once he had started he was eager to see the adventure through. It was strange, but stranger things had happened. More than one correspondent with queer personal experiences had taught him that. Nor was Steel in the least afraid. He was horribly frightened of disgrace or humiliation, but physical courage he had in a high degree. And was he not going to save his home and his good name?

David had not the least doubt on the latter score. Of course he would do nothing wrong, neither would he keep the money. This he preferred to regard as a loan—a loan to be paid off before long. At any rate, money or no money he would have been sorry to have abandoned the adventure now.

His spirits rose as he walked along a great weight had fallen from his shoulders. He smiled as he thought of his mother peacefully sleeping at home. What would his mother think if she knew? But, then, nobody was to know. That had been expressly settled in the bond.

Save for an occasional policeman the streets were deserted. It was a little cold and raw for the time of year, and a fog like a pink blanket was creeping in from the sea. Down in the Steine the big arc-lights gleamed here and there like nebulous blue globes; it was hardly possible to see across the road. In the half shadow behind Steel the statue of the First Gentleman in Europe glowed gigantic, ghost-like in the mist.

It was marvellously still there, so still that David could hear the tinkle of the pebbles on the beach. He stood back by the gate of the gardens watching the play of the leaf silhouettes on the pavement, quaint patterns of fantastic designs thrown up in high relief by the arc-light above. From the dark foggy throat of St. James's Street came the tinkle of a cycle bell. On so still a night the noise seemed bizarre and out of place. Then the cycle loomed in sight; the rider, muffled and humped over the front wheel, might have been a man or a woman. As the cyclist flashed by something white and gleaming dropped into the road, and the single word "Come" seemed to cut like a knife through the fog. That was all; the rider had looked neither to the right nor to the left, but the word was distinctly uttered. At the same instant an arm dropped and a long finger pointed to the gleaming white square in the road. It was like an instantaneous photograph—a flash, and the figure had vanished in the fog.

"This grows interesting," Steel muttered. "Evidently my shadowy friend has dropped a book of rules in the road for me. The plot thickens."

It was only a plain white card that lay in the road. A few lines were typed on the back of it. The words might have been curt, but they were to the point :—

"Go along the sea front and turn into Brunswick Square. Walk along the right side of the square until you reach No. 218. You will read the number over the fanlight. Open the door and it will yield to you; there is no occasion to knock. The first door inside the hall leads to the dining-room. Walk into there and wait. Drop this card down the gutter just opposite you."

David read the directions once or twice carefully. He made a mental note of 218. After that he dropped the card down the drain-trap nearest at hand. A little way ahead of him he heard the cycle bell trilling as if in approval of his action. But David had made up his mind to observe every rule of the game. Besides, he might be rigidly watched.

The spirit of adventure was growing upon Steel now. He was no longer holding the solid result before his eyes He was ready to see the thing through for its own sake. And as he hurried up North Street, along Western Road, and finally down Preston Street, he could hear the purring tinkle of the cycle bell before him. But not once did he catch sight of the shadowy rider.

All the same his heart was beating a little faster as he turned into Brunswick Square. All the houses were in pitchy darkness, as they naturally would be at one o'clock in the morning, so it was only with great difficulty that Steel could make out a number here and there. As he walked slowly and hesitatingly along the cycle bell drummed impatiently ahead of him.

"A hint to me," David muttered. "Stupid that I should have forgotten the directions to read the number over the fanlight. Also it is logical to suppose that I am going to find lights at No. 218. All right my friend; no need to swear at me with that bell of yours."

He quickened his pace again and finally stopped before one of the big houses where lights were gleaming from the hall and dinaing-room windows. They were electric lights by their great power, and, save for the hall and dining-room, the rest of the house lay in utter darkness. The cycle bell let off an approving staccato from behind the blankety fog as Steel pulled up.

There was nothing abnormal about the house, nothing that struck the adventurer's eye beyond the extraordinary vividness of the crimson blind. The two side-windows of the big bay were evidently shuttered, but the large centre gleamed like a flood of scarlet overlaid with a silken sheep. Far across the pavement the ruby track struck into the heart of the fog.

"Vivid note," Steel murmured. "I shall remember that impression."

He was destined never to forget it, but it was only one note in the gamut of adventure now. With a firm step he walked up the marble flight and turned the handle. It felt dirty and rusty to the touch. Evidently the servants were meglectful, or they were employed by people who had small regard for outward appearances.

The door opened noiselesslessly, and Steel closed it behind him. A Moorish lantern cast a brilliant flood of light upon a crimson carpet, a chair, and an empty oak umbrella stand. Beyond this there was no atom of furniture in the hall. It was impossible to see beyond the dining-room door, for a heavy red velvet curtain was drawn across. David's first impression was the amazing stillness of the place. It gave him a queer feeling that a murder had been committed there, and that everybody had fled, leaving the corpse behind. As David coughed away the lump in his throat the cough sounded strangely hollow.

He passed into the dining-room and looked eagerly about him. The room was handsomely furnished, if a little conventional—a big mahogany table in the centre, rows of mahogany chairs upholstered in morocco, fine modern prints, most of them artists' proofs, on the walls. A big marble clock, flanked by a pair of vases, stood on the mantelshelf. There were a large number of blue vases on the sideboard. The red distemper had faded to a pale pink in places.

"Tottenham Court Road," Steel smiled to himself. "Modern, solid, expensive, but decidedly inartistic. Ginger jars fourteen guineas a pair, worth about as many pence. Moneyed peaple, solid and respectable, of the middle class. What brings them playing at mystery like this?"

The room was most brilliantly lighted both from overhead and from the walls. On the shining desert of the dining-table lay a small, flat parcel addressed to David Steel, Esq. The novelist tore off the cover and disclosed a heap of crackling white papers beneath. Rapidly he fluttered the crisp sheets over—seventy Bank of England notes for £10 each.

It was the balance of the loan, the price paid for Steel's presence. All he had to do now was to place the money in his pocket and walk out of the house. A few steps and he would be free with nobody to say him nay. It was a temptation, but Steel fought it down. He slipped the precious notes into his pocket and buttoned his coat tightly over them. He had no fear for the coming day now.

"And yet," he murmured, "what of the price I shall have to pay for this?"

(To be Continued.)

PROFESSOR AND THE WAITER.

In Berlin the waiters in beer-gardens are very sly in securing tips. When a guest pays his bill and the waiter has to give change, the latter returns all the change correctly except ten pfennigs. The waiter searches industriously in all his pockets and displays ostentatiously all his money, but he has no ten-pfennig piece. As a general thing the departing guest becomes impatient, and, tired of waiting for the small amount tells the waiter to keep the change.

A celebrated professor who was a frequent visitor to the beer-gardens had his curiosity excited to find out what the waiters did with the ten-pfennig pieces, so he watched them. He soon discovered that the waiter put all the ten-pfennig pieces in the left-hand pocket of his vest, while the rest of the money went into his trousers pocket. When the professor's turn came to pay for his beer, as usual the waiter could not find a ten-pfennig piece to complete the change.

"I am afraid," said the waiter, going furiously through his pockets, "that I haven't got a ten-pfennig piece."

"Suppose you feel in the left-hand pocket of your vest," replied the professor, suggestively.

The waiter did so, and, as he handed out the requisite coin, he whispered in the professor's ear, "I guess you were a waiter yourself once upon a time; but keep the trick dark."

A Girl's Caprice

CHAPTEER XVI.—Concl.

Meanwhile Diana and her husband, in the morning-room, are discussing the late turn of affairs with great spirit.

"It is the most fortunate thing that could have happened for Hilary, anyway," says Jim.

"Yes. I always felt—I always knew her engagement with him would come to nothing."

"So did I," with disgust. "And after all it was a most confounded will!"

"You see, Hilary is not the sort of girl to marry without love."

"I think any girl who could do it——"

"Oh, Jim, but I really think you rather advised her to do it at first."

"Not I. It was you who advised her. In my opinion the girl who could bring herself to marry a man simply for money's sake ought to get the sack——"

"My dear Jim! how dreadfully vulgar! That is what the servants say when--well—when one gives them warning—the sack, you know!"

"And the bowstring, I was about to add, when"—with dignity—"I was interrupted. Really, Diana, the head of the house ought sometimes to be shown the consideration that ——"

"Oh, bother!" says Diana, most irreverently. "Let us talk about Hilary. Do you know, Jim, I am even now rather sorry that she won't marry Mr. Ker."

"Of course. She would be twice as well off then as she is at present. Women are never satisfied."

"And this from you!" says Diana, tragically. "But look here, Jim. I really think only for Mrs. Dyson-Moore she might have married him."

"You think she liked him then?"

"Well, I don't know. But that woman spoiled it all, however it was. She kept him away from Hilary to-day. There is no doubt about that. And at the McIntyres' dance you must have noticed how she flirted with him."

"She'd flirt with a broomstick."

"Nobody would mind a broomstick. The thing is that Hilary objected to her flirting with Mr. Ker."

"I think the question is whether Ker objected!"

"Nonsense. I'm sure—I'm positive that Fred is all he ought to be!"

"Then the sooner we buy him a pedestral at the public expense, and place him on it, the sooner we shall be doing a public duty. All he ought to be! Diana! how many times have you told me I was nothing I ought to be! And that familiar appellation. Fred! I object to it."

"Oh, Jim, dearest, I wish you would be serious, if only for five minutes. Somehow, I had set my heart on this marriage; and now, because of this odious Mrs. Dyson-Moore, it is all over. She has made some mischief——"

"She's sure to be in it where mischief is brewing," says Clifford, with conviction. "Anyway, it is all over now, and I, for one, am perfectly certain Hilary wouldn't have looked at him. Girls are such fools!"

"Well," sighing, "perhaps so. She certainly treated him very capalierly."

"Don't make yourself miserable over it, Di. From all I saw I think they hated each other."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so."

"They'd have led a most awful life!"

"It would have killed darling Hilary!"

"Or Ker! Man—brute as he is—has been known to die of ill-treatment. To my thinking, they are both well out of it !"

"Yes; it would never have done."

At this moment the door is pushed slowly open, and Hilary's charming head appears. Another head is looking in over hers. It is Ker's.

Mr. and Mrs. Clifford grow paralyzed.

"Di—may we come in?" Hilary's voice is shy—her face is one soft, sweet blush. "I—we," with a charming glance behind, "want to tell you —that——"

"That we are going to be married," says Ker, in the frankest, clearest way.

"Oh," says Diana, a little faintly—then she conquers her weakness, and suddenly finds herself embracing Hilary with extreme warmth.

"I am glad," says she, giving her hands to Ker, who, however, appears dissatisfied with them, as he stoops and kisses her cheek. "And so is Jim. We always desired this delightful solution of the—difficulty—and now, when there is no difficulty, it is all the more delightful. In fact, Jim and I were just now saying——"

She catches Jim's eye, and breaks down ignominiously. What had they just been saying?

"Yes, it is a great surprise. No wonder Diana is overwhelmed," says Jim. "She was about to say we were just dwelling on—on the——" he pauses ominously, and Diana's knees grow weak, "on the happiness that would be yours if you made up your minds to spend your lives together." His tone is sweetness and light itself.

"Dear old Jim!" says Hilary, affectionately. She has not seen that Diana is growing apoplectic. Presently she carries away her new possession with her for a stroll through the garden, and Diana and Jim remain once more face to face and alone.

"Who'd have thought ?" says Dianai solemnly. "But, after all, I'm sure they will be happy! Hilary is such a darling, and he—seems so delightful, so kind; frank, I call him!"

"Frank! Nonsense, Diana, It isn't five minutes ago since you called him Fred!"

At this they both give way to subdued but uncontrollable laughter.

It was such a relief.

(The End.)

IMPETUOUS PEOPLE.

Many of the Greatest Things Have Been Done by Them.

Impetuous people are sometimes wrong, but impetuous people are not always wrong. This is a truism, but unless a truism be repeated occasionally it ceases to be identified, and is looked on by the casual reader as a daring flight of fancy.

Really, it does not matter how quickly one runs, if one will but make sure that the right turning is selected. It is the man who rushes away without sparing a moment to look up at the signposts who loses his way, and has to return slowly, with an apologetic look upon his face; he it is who gives to impetuosity a bad name, and causes folk to look upon it as a defective trait.

Most of the great things have been done by impetuous people while the overcautions have been making up what they term their minds. There are some who never can perform this task for themselves. They can take no action without asking advice of every person they meet.

The overcautions are in a never-ending state of astonishment at the fact that disaster so seldom occurs. When it does happen, they are able to say, with gloomy content, that they had foreseen it all along.

Impetuosity has cut some of the most difficult knots the while cautious folks were hurting their fingers in futile attempts to unravel them.

MORE METHOD WANTED.

"If there is one thing a woman wants," said Mr. Mumbles, as he finished his coffee, "it is method."

Mrs. Mumbles smiled meekly.

"Yes," repeated Mr. Mumbles, "method is what is necessary. A woman never knows what she has done with a thing for certain, but only has a vague idea. If you ask her for her purse, she tells you it is either in the left-hand top drawer or else in her black skirt pocket, which is hanging up either behind the bath-room door or over a chair in the bedroom, and—— By Jove! it is time I was off. Get my boots, Maud, dear. That's right. Now run up and get my umbrella. You will find it in the bedroom. What! Can't find it? That— Oh, I remember. I left it to be re-covered. Confound it! Try and find me an old one, my dear."

Mrs. Mumbles discovered an umbrella just as her devoted husband reached the hall door.

"Oh, you might get my pipe. I left it on the mantelpiece last night. Not there? Well, it must be on the bookcase. Oh, no! Run upstairs quickly, or I shall miss the train. I left it on the dressing-table. That's it. Thank you. Where are my gloves? Don't know? Well, you ought to know. Shall have to go without them. Nice thing—disgraceful!"

And the methodical man hurried off just in time to miss his train.

A LUCID EXPLANATION.

An English law journal attributes to an American judge down South the following charge to a jury in explanation of the difference between a verdict of murder and one of manslaughter:—

"Gentlemen," he stated, with admirably lucidity, "murder is where a man is murderously killed. The killer in such a case is a murderer. Now, murder by poison is just as much murder as murder with a gun, pistol, or knife. It is the simple act of murdering that constitutes murder in the eye of the law. Don't let the idea of murder and manslaughter confound you. Murder is one thing, manslaughter is quite another. Consequently, if there has been murder, and it is not manslaughter, then it must be murder.

"Don't let this point escape you. Self-murder has nothing to do with this case. According to Blackstone and all the best legal writers, one man cannot felo de se upon another; and this is clearly my opinion. Gentlemen, murder is murder. The murder of a brother is called fratricide; the murder of a father is called parricide, but that don't enter into this case. As I have said before, murder is emphatically murder. You will now consider your verdict, gentlemen, and make up your minds according to the law and the evidence, not forgetting the explanation I have given you."

Daughter—"Ma, I want you to stop bossing it over pa, until after I get married." Mother—"Why, I should like to know?" Daughter—"Just as quick as I get a little bit intimate with a young man, he begins to ask if I take after you."

"What did you buy with that money your uncle left you?" "I bought experience," was the rueful reply. "Spend it all for that?" "My dear sir, I never was much good at bargains, and the ordinary priced experience was what I got."