The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

Well, it was worth a ransom. And, so long as there was nothing dishonorable attached to it, Steel was prepared to redeem his pledge. He knew perfectly well from bitter experience that the poor man pays usurious rates for fortune's favors. And he was not without a strange sense of gratitude. If——

Click, click, click. Three electric switches were snapped off almost simultaneously outside, and the dining-room was plunged into pitchy darkness. Steel instantly caught up a chair. He was no coward, but he was a novelist with a novelist's imagination. As he stood there the sweetest, most musical laugh in the world broke on his ear. He caught the swish of silken drapery and the subtle scent that suggested fragrance of a woman's hair. It was vague, undefined, yet soothing.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Steel," the silvery voice said. "Believe me, had there been any other way, I would not have given you all this trouble. You found the parcel addressed to you? It is an earnest of good faith. Is not that a correct English expression?"

David murmured that it was. But what did the speaker mean? She asked the question like a student of the English language, yet her accent and phrasing were perfect. She laughed again noiselessly, and once more Steel caught the subtle, entrancing perfume.

"I make no further apology for dragging you here at this time," the sweet voice said. "We knew that you were in the habit of sitting up alone late at night, hence the telephone message. You will perhaps wonder how we came to know so much of your private affairs. Rest assured that we learnt nothing in Brighton. Presently you may gather why I am so deeply interested in you; I have been for the past fortnight. You see, we were not quite certain that you would come to our assistance unless we could find some means of coercing you. Then we go to one of the smartest inquiry agents in the world and say: 'Tell us all about Mr. David Steel without delay. Money is no object.' In less than a week we know all about Beckstein. We leave matters till the last moment. If you only knew how revolting it all was!"

"So your tone seems to imply, madam," Steel said, dryly.

"Oh, but truly. You were in great trouble, and we found a way to get you out. At a price; ah, yes. But your trouble is nothing compared with mine—which brings me to business. A fortnight ago last Monday you posted to Mr. Vanstone, editor of the 'Piccadilly Magazine,' the synopsis of the first four or five chapters of a proposed serial for the journal in question. You open that story with a young and beautiful woman who is in deadly peril. Is not that so?"

"Yes," Steel said, faintly. "It is just as you suggest. But how——"

"Never mind that, because I am not going to tell you. In common parlance—is not that the word—that woman is in a frightful fix. There is nothing strained about your heroine's situation, because I have heard of people being in a similar plight before. Mr. Steel, I want you to tell me truthfully and candidly can you see the way clear to save your heroine? Oh, I don't mean by the long arm of coincidence or other favorite ruses known to your craft. I mean by common sense, logical methods, by brilliant ruses, by Machiavellian means. Tell me, do you see a way?"

The question came eagerly, almost imploringly, from the darkness. David could hear the quick gasps of his questioner, could catch the rustle of the silken corsage as she breathed.

"Yes," he said, "I can see a brilliant way out that would satisfy the strictest logician. But you——"

"Thank Heaven! Mr. Steel, I am your heroine. I am placed in exactly the same position as the woman whose story you are going to write. The setting is different, the local coloring is not the same, but the same deadly peril menaces me. For the love of Heaven hold out your hand to save a lonely and desperate woman whose only crime is that she is rich and beautiful. Providence had placed in my hands the gist of your heroine's story. Hence this masquerade; hence the fact that you are here to-night. I have helped you—help me in return."

It was some time before Steel spoke.

"It shall be as you wish," he said. "I will tell you how I propose to save my heroine. Her sufferings are fiction; yours will be real. But if you are to be saved by the same means, Heaven help you to bear the troubles that are in front of you. Before God, it would be more merciful for me to be silent and let you go your own way."

CHAPTER III.

David was silent for some little time. The strangeness of the situation had shut down on him again, and he was thinking of nothing else for the moment. In the dead stillness of the place he could hear the quick breathing of his companion; the rustle of her dress seemed near to him and then to be very far off. Nor did the pitchy darkness yield a jot to his now accustomed eyes. He held a hand close to his eyes, but he could see nothing.

"Well?" the sweet voice in the darkness said, impatiently. "Well?"

"Believe me, I will give you all the assistance possible. If you would only turn up the light——"

"Oh, I dare not. I have given my word of honor not to violate the seal of secrecy. You may say that we have been absurdly cautious in this matter, but you would not think so if you knew everything. Even now the wretch who holds me in his power may have guessed my strategy and be laughing at me. Some day, perhaps——"

The speaker stopped, with something like a sob in her throat.

"We are wasting precious time," she went on, more calmly. "I had better tell you my history. In your story a woman commits a crime: she is guilty of a serious breach of trust to save the life of a man she loves. By doing so she places the future and the happiness of many people in the hands of an abandoned scoundrel. If she can only manage to regain the thing she has parted from the situation is saved. Is not that so?"

"So far you have stated the case correctly," David murmured.

"As I said before, I am in practically similar case. Only, in my situation, I hastened everything and risked the happiness of many people for the sake of a little child."

"Ah!" David cried. "Your own child? No! The child of one very near and dear to you, then. From the mere novelist point of view, that is a far more artistic idea than mine. I see that I shall have to amend my story before it is published."

A rippling little laugh came like the song of a bird in the darkness.

"Dear Mr. Steel," the voice said, "I implore you to do nothing af the kind. You are a man of fertile imagination—a plot more or less makes no difference to you. If you publish that story you go far on the way to ruin me."

"I am afraid that I am in the dark in more senses than one," David murmured.

"Then let me enlighten you. Daily your books are more widely read. My enemy is a great novel reader. You publish that story, and what results? You not only tell that enemy my story, but you show him my way out of the difficulty, and show him how he can checkmate my every move. Perhaps, after I have escaped from the net——"

"You are right," Steel said, promptly. "From a professional point of view the story is abandoned. And now you want me to show you a rational and logical, a human, way out."

"If you can do so you have my everlasting gratitude."

"Then you must tell me in detail what it is you want to recover. My heroine parts with a document which the villain knows to be a forgery. Money cannot buy it back because the villain can make as much money as he likes by retaining it. He does as he likes with the family property; he keeps my heroine's husband out of England by dangling the forgery and its consequences over his head. What is to be done? How is the ruffian to be bullied into a false sense of security by the one man who desires to throw dust in his eyes?"

"Ah," the voice cried, "ah, if you could only tell me that! Let my ruffian only imagine that I am dead; let him have proofs of it, and the thing is done. I could reach him then; I could tear from him the letter that—but I need not go into details. But he is cunning as the serpent. Nothing but the most convincing proofs would satisfy him."

"A certificate of death signed by a physician beyond reproach?"

"Yes, that would do. But you couldn't get a medical man like that to commit felony."

"No, but we could trick him into it," Steel exclaimed. "In my story s fraud is perpetrated to blind the villain and to derive him of his weapons. It is a case of the end justifying the means. But it is one thing, my dear lady, to commit fraud actually and to perpetrate it in a novel. In the latter case you can defy the police, but unfortunately you and I are dealing with real life. If I am to help you I must be a party to a felony."

"But you will! You are not going to draw back now? Mr. Steel, I have saved your home. You are a happy man compared to what you were two hours ago. If the risk is great you have brains and imagination to get out of danger. Show me how to do it, and the test shall be mine. You have never seen me, you know nothing, not even the name of the person who called you over the telephone. You have only to keep your own counsel, and if I wade in blood to my end you are safe. Tell me how I can die, disappear, leaving that one man to believe I am no more. And don't make it too ingenious. Don't forget that you promised to tell me a rational way out of the difficulty. How can it be done?"

"In my pocket I have a cutting from the 'Times,' which contains a chapter from the history of a medical student who is alone in London. It closely resembles my plot. He says he has no friends, and he deems it prudent for reasons we need not discuss to let the world assume that he is dead. The rest is tolerably easy. He disguises himself and goes to a doctor of repute, whom he asks to come and see his brother—i.e., himself—who is dangerously ill. The doctor goes later in the day and finds his patient in bed with severe internal inflammation. This is brought about by a free use of albumen. I don't know what amount of albumen one would take without extreme risk, but you could pump that information out of any doctor. Well, our medical man calls again and yet again, and finds his patient sinking. The next day the patient, disguised, calls upon his doctor with the information that his 'brother' is dead. The doctor is not in the least surprised, and without going to view the body gives a certificate of death. Now, I admit that all this sounds cheap and theatrical, but you can't get over facts. The thing actually happened a little time ago in London, and there is no reason why it shouldn't happen again."

"You suggest that I should do this thing?" the voice asked.

"Pardon me, I did nothing of the kind," Steel replied. "You asked me to show you how my heroine gets herself out of a terrible position, and I am doing it. You are not without friends. The way I was called up to-night and the way I was brought here prove that. With the aid of your friends the thing is pos' sible to you. You have only to find a lodging where people are not too observant and a doctor who is too busy or too careless, to look after dead patients, and the thing is done. If you desire to be looked upon as dead—especially by a powerful enemy—I cannot recommend a more natural, rational way than this. As to the details, they may be safely left to you. The clever manner in which you have kept up the mystery to-night convinces me that I have nothing to teach you in this direction. And if there is anything more I can do—"

"A thousand, thousand thanks," the voice cried, passionately. "To be looked upon as 'dead,' to be near to the rascal who smiles to think that I am in my grave. And everything so dull and prosaic on the surface! Yes, I have friends who will aid me in the business. Some day I may be able to thank you face to face, to tell you how I managed to see your plot. May I?"

The question came quite eagerly, almost imploringly. In the darkness Steel felt a hand trembling on his breast, a cool, slim hand, with many rings on the fingers. Steel took the hand and carried it to his lips.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," he said. "And may you be successful. Good-night."

"Good-night, and God bless you for a real gentleman and a true friend. I will go out of the room first and put the lights up afterwards. You will walk away and close the door behind you. The news paper cutting! Thanks. And once more good-night, but let us hope not good-bye."

She was gone. Steel could hear the distant dying swish of silk, the rustling of the portiere, and then, with a flick, the lights came up again. Half-blinded by the sudden illumination Steel fumbled his way to the door and into the street. As he did so Hove Town Hall clock chimed two. With a cigarette between his teeth David made his way home.

He could not think it all out yet; he would wait until he was in his own comfortable chair under the roses and palms leading from his study. A fine night of adventure, truly, and a paying one. He pressed the precious packet of notes to his side and his soul expanded.

He was home at last. But surely he had closed the door before he started? He remembered distinctly trying the latch. And here the latch was back and the door open. The quick snap of the electric light declared nobody in the dining-room. Beyond, the study was in darkness. Nobody there, but—stop!

A stain on the carpet; another by the conservatory door. Pots of flowers scattered about, and a huddled mass like a litter of empty sacks in one corner. Then the huddled mass resolved itself into the figure of a man with a white face smeared with blood. Dead! Oh, yes dead enough.

Steel flew to the telephone and rang furiously.

"Give me 52, Police Station," he cried. "Are you there? Send somebody at once up here—15, Downend Terrace. There has been murder done here. For Heaven's sake come quickly."

Steel dropped the receiver and stared with strained eyes at the dreadful sight before him.

CHAPTER IV.

For some time—a minute, an hour—Steel stood over the dreadful thing huddled upon the floor of his conservatory. Just then he was incapable of consecutive ideas.

His mind began to move at length. The more he thought of it the more absolutely certain he was that he had fastened the door before leaving the house. True, the latch was only an ordinary one, and a key might easily have been made to fit it. As a matter of fact, David had two, one in reserve in case of accidents. The other was usually kept in a jewel-drawer of the dressing-table. Perhaps——

David went quietly upstairs. It was just possible that the murderer was in the house. But the closest search brought nothing to light. He pulled out the jewel-drawer in the dressing-table. The spare latch-key had gone! Here was something to go upon.

Then there was a rumbling of an electric bell somewhere that set David's heart beating like a drum. The hall light streamed on a policeman in uniform and an inspector in a dark overcoat and a hard felt hat. On the pavement was a long shallow tray, which David recognised mechanically as the ambulance.

"Something very serious, sir?" Inspector Marley asked, quietly. "I've brought the doctor with me."

David nodded. Both the inspector and the doctor were acquaintances of his. He closed the door and led the way into the study. Just inside the conservatory and not far from the huddled figure lay David's new cigar-case. Doubtless, without knowing it, the owner had whisked it off the table when he had sprung the telepnone.

"'Um," Marley muttered. "Is this a clue, or yours, sir?"

He lifted the case with its diadiamonds gleaming like stars on a dark night. David had forgotten all about it for the time, had forgotten where it came from, or that it contained £250 in bank-notes.

"Not mine," he said. "I mean to say, of course, it is mine. A recent present. The shock of this discovery has deprived me of my senses pretty well."

Marley laid the cigar-case on the table. It seemed strange to him, who could follow a tragedy calmly, that a man should forget his own property. Meanwhile Cross was bending over the body. David could see a face smooth like that of a woman. A quick little exclamation came from the doctor.

"A drop of brandy here, and quick as possible," he commanded.

"You don't mean to say," Steel began: "you don't——"

Cross waved his arm, impatiently. The brandy was procured as speedily as possible. Steel, watching intently, fancied that he detected a slight flicker of the muscles of the white stark face.

"Bring the ambulance here," Cross said, curtly. "If we can get this poor chap to the hospital there is just a chance for him. Fortunately we have not many yards to go."

As far as elucidation went Marley naturally looked to Steel.

"I should like to have your explanation, sir," he said gravely.

"Positively, I have no explanation to offer," David replied. "About midnight I let myself out to go for a stroll, carefully closing the door behind me. Naturally, the door was on the latch. When I came back an hour or so later, to my horror and surprise I found those marks of a struggle yonder and that poor fellow lying on the floor of the conservatory."

"'Um. Was the door fast on your return?"

"No, it was pulled to, but it was open all the same."

"You didn't happen to lose your latch-key during your idnight stroll sir?"

"No, it was only when I put my key in the door that I discovered it to be open. I have a spare latch-key which I keep for emergencies, but when I went to look for it just now the key was not to be found. When I came back the house was perfectly quiet."

"What family have you, sir? And what kind of servants?"

"There is only myself and my mother, with three maids. You may dismiss any suspicion of the servants from your mind at once. My mother trained them all in the old vicarage where I was born, and not one of the trio has been with us less than twelve years."

"That simplifies matters somewhat," Marley said, thoughtfully. "Apparently your latch-key was stolen by somebody who has made careful study of your habits. Do you generally go for late walks after your household has gone to bed, sir?"

David replied somewhat grudgingly that he had never done such a thing before. He would like to have concealed the fact, but it was bound to come out sooner or later. He had strolled along the front and round Brunswick Square. Marley shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it's a bit of a puzzle to me," he admitted. "You go out for a midnight walk—a thing you have never done before—and when you come back you find somebody has got into your house by means of a stolen latch-key and murdered somebody else in your conservatory. According to that, two people must have entered the house."

"That's logic," David admitted. "There can be no murder without the slain and the slayer. My impression is that somebody who knows the ways of the house watched me depart. Then he lured his victim in here under pretence that it was his own house—he had the purloined latch-key—and murdered him. Audacious, but a far safer way than doing it out of doors."

But Marley's imagination refused to go so far. The theory was plausible enough, he pointed out respectfully, if the assassin had been assured that these midnight rambles were a matter of custom. The point was a shrewd one, and Steel had to admit it. He almost wished now that he had suggested that he often took these midnight rambles. He regretted the fiction still more when Marley asked if he had had some appointment elsewhere to-night.

"No," Dapid said, promptly, "I hadn't."

He prevaricated without hesitation. His adventure in Brunswick Square could not possibly have anything to do with the tragedy, and nothing would be gained by betraying that trust.

"I'll run round to the hospital and come and see you again in the morning, sir," Marley said. "Whatever was the nature of the crime, it wasn't robbery, or the criminal wouldn't have left that cigar-case of yours behind. Sir James Lythem had one stolen like that at the last races, and he valued it at £80."

"I'll come as far as the hospital with you," said Steel.

At the bottom of the flight of steps they encountered Dr. Cross and the policeman. The former handed over to Marley a pocket-book and some papers, together with a watch and chain.

"Everything that we could find upon him," he explained.

"Is the poor fellow dead yet?" David asked.

"No," Cross replied. "He was stabbed twice in the back in the region of the liver. I could not say for sure, but there is just a chance that he may recover. But one thing is pretty certain it will be a good time before he is in a position to say anything for himself. Good-night Mr. Steel."

David went indoors thoughtfully, with a general feeling that something like a hand had grasped his brain and was squeezing it like a sponge. He was free from his carking anxiety now, but it seemed to him that he was paying a heavy price for his liberty. Mechanically, he counted out the banknotes, and almost as mechanically he cut his initials on the gun-metal inside the cigar-case. He was one of the kind of men who like to have their initials everywhere.

He snapped the lights out and went to bed at last. But not to sleep. The welcome dawn came at length and David took his bath gratefully. He would have to tell his mother what had happened, suppressing all reference to the Brunswick Square episode. It was not a pleasant story, but Mrs. Steel assimilated it at length over her early tea and toast.

"It might have been you, my dear," she said, placidly. "And, indeed, it is a dreadful business. But why not telephone to the hospital and ask how the poor fellow is?"

The patient was better, but was still in an unconscious condition.

(To be Continued.)

ABOUT FLATTERY.

When it is Commendable and When Meaningless.

When it comes to a choice between the so-called flatterer and the woman who "says right out just what she means," it is generally hard to decide, but some varieties of the flatterer do deserve a good word. The neighborhood accuses a certain woman of my acquaintance of giving "too much molasses for the bread," yet it admits that she never speaks an unkind word of any one. Think what that means! If I could build up a reputation like that, I would willingly be known as the managing director of a spiritual sugar refinery.

If you feel cast down about your just-purchased hat, or dress, or picture, or sideboard, this alleged flatterer will open your eyes to its saving qualities. If your new window shades seem too bilious-colored to be endured, she will point out to you that they are twin bursts of sunshine in an otherwise grey and cloudy world. If you are simply blue without reason, she will give you a good reason for being otherwise. It is the habit of her life to make the best of every person and every set of circumstances that comes to her.

This, of course, is no defence of the flatterer, who is always at summer heat in your presence, and sinks to biting frost when your back is turned. It is only a plea that the latter should not be confounded with the woman who makes of every social atmosphere "good growing weather" for the ever lovely virtues of trust and charity, harmony and hope.

HOW INDIANS COUNT.

The Indians of Guinea have a curious system of numeration. They count by the hand and its four fingers. Thus, when they reach five, instead of saying so, they call it a "hand." Six is, therefore, a "hand and first finger"; seven, a "hand and second finger." Ten is "two hands"; but twenty, instead of being "four nands," is a "man." Forty is "two men," and thus they go on by twenties. Forty-six is expressed as "two men, a hand and first finger."

FRESH AIR TABLETS.

"Fresh air tablets" have been prepared by a foreign scientist, who, while investigating acetylene, found a combination of several chemicals, which, being dropped into water, dissolved and gave forth pure oxygen. Such tablets should be extremely useful in closed carriages, submarine boats, and mines.