The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL.

CHAPTER V.

Steel swallowed a hasty breakfast and hurried off townwards. He had £1,000 packed away in his cigarcase, and the sooner he was free from Beckstein the better he would be pleased. He came at length to the offices of Messrs. Mossa and Mack, whose brass-plate bore the legend that the gentry in question were solicitors, and that they also had a business in London. As David strode into the offices of the senior partner that individual looked up with a shade of anxiety in his deep, Oriental eyes.

"If you have come to offer terms," he said, nasally, "I am sorry——"

"To hear that I have come to pay in full," David said, grimly; "£974 16s. 4d. up to yesterday, which I understand is every penny you can rightfully claim. Here it is. Count it."

He opened the cigar-case and took the notes therefrom. Mr. Mossa counted them very carefully indeed. The shade of disappointment was still upon his aquiline features. He had hoped to put in execution to-day and sell David up. In that way quite £200 might have been added to his legitimate earnings.

"It appears to be all correct," Mossa said, dismally.

"So I imagined, sir. You will be so good as to indorse the receipt on the back of the writ. Of course you are delighted tn find that I am not putting you to painful extremities. Any other firm of solicitors would have given me time to pay this. But I am like the man whe journeyed from Jericho to Jerusalem——"

"And fell amongst thieves! You dare to call me a thief? You dare—"

"I didn't," Daivid said, drily. "That fine, discriminating mind of yours saved me the trouble. I have met some tolerably slimy scoundrels in my time, but never any one of them more despicable than yourself. Faugh! the mere sight of you sickens me. Let me get out of the place so that I can breathe."

David strode out of the office with the remains of his small fortune rammed into his pocket. In the wild, unreasoning rage that came over him he had forgotten his cigar-case. And it was some little time before Mr. Mossa was calm enough to see the diamonds winking at him.

"Our friend is in funds," he muttered. "Well, he shall have a dance for his cigar-case. I'll send it up to the police-station and say that some gentleman or other left it here by accident. And if that Steel comes back we can say that there is no cigar-case here. And if Steel does not see the police advertisement he will lose his pretty toy, and serve him right. Yes, that is the way to serve him out."

Mr. Mossa proceeded to put his scheme into execution whilst David was strolling along the sea front. He was too excited for work, though he felt easier in his mind than he had done for months. He turned mechanically on to the Palace Pier, at the head of which an Eastbourne steamer was blaring and panting. The trip appealed to David in his present frame of mind. Like most of his class, he was given to acting on the spur of the moment. It was getting dark as David let himself into Downend Terrace with his latch-key.

How good it was to be back again! The eye of the artist rested fondly upon the beautiful things around. And but for the sport of chance, the whim of fate, these had all passed from him by this time. It was good to look across the dining-table over Venetian glass, to see the pools of light cast by the shaded electric, to note the feathery fall of flowers, and to see that placid, gentle face in its frame of white hair opposite him. Mrs. Steel's simple, unaffected pride in her son was not the least gratifying part of David's success.

"You have not suffered from the shock, mother?" he asked.

"Well, no," Mrs. Steel confessed, placidly. "You see, I never had what people call nerves, my dear. And, after all, I saw nothing. Still I am very, very sorry for that poor young man, and I have sent to inquire after him several times."

"He is no worse or I should have heard of it."

"No, and and no better. And Inspector Marley has been here to see you twice to-day."

David pitied himself as much as a man could pity himself considering his surroundings. It was rather annoying that this should have happened at a time when he was so busy. And Marley would have all sorts of questions to ask at all sorts of inconvenient seasons.

Steel passed into his study presently and lighted a cigarette. Despite his determination to put the events of yesterday from his mind, he found himself constantly returning to them. What a splendid dramatic story they would make! And what a fascinating mystery could be woven round that gun-metal cigar-case!

By the way, where was the cigar-case? On the whole it would be just as well to lock the case away till he could discover some reasonable excuse for its possession. His mother would be pretty sure to ask where it came from, and David could not prevaricate so far as she was concerned, But the cigar-case was not to be found, and David was forced to the conclusion that he had left it in Mossa's office.

A little annoyed with himself he took up the evening 'Argus.' There was half a column devoted to the strange case at Downend Terrace, and just over it a late advertisement to the effect that a gun-metal cigar case had been found and was in the hands of the police awaiting an owner.

David slipped from the house and caught a 'bus in St. George's Road. At the police-station he learnt that Inspector Marley was still on the premises. Marley came forward gravely. He had a few questions to ask, but nothing to tell.

"And now perhaps you can give me some information?" David said. "You are advertising in to-night's 'Argus' a gun-metal cigar-case set with diamonds."

"Ah," Marley said, eagerly. "can you tell us anything about it?"

"Nothing beyond the fact that I hope to satisfy you that the case is mine."

Marley stared open-mouthed at David for a moment, and then relapsed into his sapless official manner. He might have been a detective cross-examining a suspected criminal.

"Why this mystery?" David asked. "I have lost a gun-metal cigar-case set with diamonds, and I see a similar article is noted as found by the police. I lost it this morning, and I shrewdly suspect that I left it behind me at the office of Mr. Mossa."

"The case was sent here by Mr. Mossa, himself," Marley admitted.

"Then, of course, it is mine. I had to give Mr. Mossa my opinion of him this morning and by way of spiting me he sent that case here, hoping, perhaps, that I should not recover it. You know the case, Marley—it was lying on the floor of my conservatory last night."

"I did notice a gun-metal case there," Marley said, cautiously.

"As a matter of fact, you called my attention to it and asked if it was mine."

"And you said at first that it wasn't, sir."

"Well, you must make allowances for my then frame of mind." David laughed. "I rather gather from your manner that somebody else has been after the case; if that is so, you are right to be reticent. Still, it is in your hands to settle the matter on the spot. All you have to do is to open the case, and if you fail to find my initials, D. S., scratched in the left-hand top corner, then I have lost my property and the other fellow has found his."

In the same reticent fashion Marley proceeded to unlock a safe in the corner, and from thence he produced what appeared to be the identical cause of all this talk. He pulled the electric table lamp over to him and proceeded to examine the inside carefully.

"Yod are quite right," he said, at length. "Your initials are here."

"Not strange, seeing that I scratched them there last night," said David, drily. "When? Oh, it was after you left my house last night."

"And it has been some time in your possession, sir?"

"Oh, confound it, no- It was—well it was a present from a friend for a little service tendered. So far as I understand, it was purchased at Lockhart's, in North Street. No, I'll be hanged if I answer any more of your questions, Marley. I'll be your Aunt Sally so far as you are officially concerned. But as to yonder case, your queries are distinctly impertinent."

Marley shook his head gravely, as one might over a promising and headstrong boy.

"Do I understand that you decline to account for the case?" he asked.

"Certainly I do. It is connected with some friends of mine to whom I rendered a service a little time back. The whole thing is and must remain an absolute secret."

"You are placing yourself in a very delicate position, Mr. Steel."

David started at the gravity of the tone. That something was radically wrong came upon him like a shock. And he could see pretty clearly that, without betraying confidence, he could not logically account for the possession of the cigarcase. In any case it was too much to expect that the stolid police officer would listen to so extravagant a tale for a moment.

"What on earth do you mean, man?" he cried.

"Well, it's this way, sir," Marley proceeded to explain. "When I pointed out the case to you lying on the floor of your conservatory last night you said it wasn't yours. You looked at it with the eyes of a stranger, and then you said you were mistaken. From information given me last night I have been making inquiries about the cigar-case. You took it to Mr. Mossa's, and from it you produced notes to the value of nearly £1,000 to pay off a debt. Within eight-and-forty hours you had no more prospect of paying that debt than I have at this moment. Of course, you will be able to account for those notes. You can, of course?"

Marley looked eagerly at his visitor. A cold chill was playing up and down Steel's spine. Not to save his life could he account for those notes.

"We will discuss that when the proper time comes," he said, with fine indifference.

"As you please, sir. From information also received I took the case to Walen's, in West Street and asked Mr. Walen if he had seen the case before. Pressed to identify it, he handed me a glass and asked me to find the figures (say) '1771.x.3,' in tiny characters on the edge. I did so by the aid of the glass, and Mr. Walen further proceeded to show me an entry in his purchasing ledger which proved that a cigar-case in gun-metal and diamonds bearing that legend had been added to the stock quite recently—a few weeks ago, in fact."

"Well, what of that?" David asked, impatiently. "For all I know, the case might have come from Walen's. I said it came from a friend who must needs be nameless for services equally nameless. I am not going to deny that Walen was right."

"I have not quite finished," Marley said, quietly. "Pressed as to when the case had been sold, Mr. Walen, without hesitation, said: 'Yesterday, for £72 15s.' The purchaser was a stranger, whom Mr. Walen is prepared to identify. Asked if a formal receipt had been given, Walen said that it had. And now I come to the gist of the whole matter. You saw Dr. Cross hand me a mass of papers, etc., taken from the person of the gentleman who was nearly killed in your house?"

David nodded. His breath was coming a little faster. His quick mind had run on ahead; he saw the gulf looming before him.

"Go on," said he, hoarsely, "go on. You mean to say that——"

"That amongst the papers found in the pocket of the unfortunate stranger was a receipted bill for the very cigar-case that lies here on the table before you!"

CHAPTER VI.

Steel dropped into a chair and gazed at Inspector Marley with mild surprise. At the same time he was not in the least alarmed. Not that he failed to recognise the gravity of the situation, only it appealed in the first instance to the professional side of his character.

"Walen is quite sure?" he asked. "No possible doubt about that, eh?"

"Not in the least. You see, he recognised his private mark at once, and Brighton is not so prosperous a place that a man could sell a £70 cigar-case and forget all about it—that is, a second case, I mean. It's most extraordinary."

"Rather! Make a magnificent story Marley."

"Very," Marley responded, drily. "It would take all your well-known ingenuity to get your hero out of this trouble."

Steel nodded gravely. This personal twist brought him to the earth again. He could clearly see the trap into which he had placed himself. There before him lay the cigar-case which he had positively identified as his own; inside, his initials bore testimony to the fact. And yet the same case had been identified beyond question as one sold by a highly respectable local tradesman to the mysterious individual now lying in the Sussex County Hospital.

"May I smoke a cigarette?" David asked.

"You may smoke a score if they will be of any assistance to you, sir" Marley replied. "I don't want to ask you any questions and I don't want you—well, to commit yourself. But really, sir, you must admit——"

The inspector paused significantly. David nodded again.

"Pray proceed," he said; "speak from the brief you have before you."

"Well, you see it's this way." Marley said, not without hesitation. "You call us up to your house, saying that a murder has been committed there; we find a stranger almost at his last gasp in your conservatory with every signs of a struggle having taken place. You tell us that the injured man is a stranger to you; you go on to say that he must have found his way into your house during a nocturnal ramble of yours. Well, that sounds like common sense on the face of it. The criminal has studied your habits and has taken advantage of them. Then I ask if you are in the habit of taking these midnight strolls, and with some signs of hesitation you say that you have never done such a thing before. Charles Dickens was very fond of that kind of thing, and I naturally imagined that you had the same fancy. But you had never done it before. And, the only time, a man is nearly murdered in your house."

"Perfectly correct," David murmured. "Gaboriau could not have put it better. You might have been a pupil of my remarkable acquaintance Hatherly Bell."

"I am a pupil of Mr. Bell's," Marley said, quietly. "Seven years ago he induced me to leave the Huddersfield police to go into his office, where I stayed until Mr. Bell gave up business, when I applied for and gained my present position. Curious you should mention Hr. Bell's name, seeing that he was here so recently as this afternoon."

"Staying in Brighton?" Steel asked, eagerly. "What is his address?"

"No. 219, Brunswick Square."

It took all the nerve that David possessed to crush the cry that rose to his lips. It was more than strange that the man he most desired to see at this juncture should be staying in the very house where the novelist had his great adventure. And in the mere fact might be the key to the problem to the cigar-case.

"I'll certainly see Bell," he muttered. "Go on, Marley.

"Yes, sir. We now proceed to the cigar-case that lies before you. It was also lying on the floor of your conservatory on the night in question. I suggested that here we might have found a clue, taking the precaution at the same time to ask if the article in question was your property. You looked at the case as one does who examines an object for the first time, proceeded to declare that it was not yours. I am quite prepared to admit that you instantly corrected yourself. But I ask, is it a usual thing for a man to forget the ownership of a £70 cigar-case?"

"A nice point, and I congratulate you upon it," David said.

"Then we will take the matter a little farther. A day or two ago you were in dire need of something like £1,000. Temporarily, at any rate, you were practically at the end of your resources. If this money were not forthcoming in a few hours you were a ruined man. In vulgar parlance, you would have been sold up. Mossa and Mack had you in their grip, and they were determined to make all they could out of you. The morning following the outrage at your house you call upon Mr. Mossa and produce the cigar-case lying on the table before you. From that case you produce notes sufficient to discharge your debt—Bank of England notes, the numbers of which, I need hardly say, are in my possession The money is produced from the case yonder, which case we know was sold to the injured man by Mr. Walen."

Marley made a long and significant pause. Steel nodded.

(To be Continued.)

THE RETIRED BURGLAR.

Corrects Some Very Erroneous Impressions.

"It's a common idea, I know," said the retired burglar, "that the burglary business must be tremendously profitable because whatever you make in it is all clear gain; but there couldn't be a greater mistake.

"It ain't the percentage of profit that counts so much, my son; it's the volume of business you do. You might have a business that was all profit and yet lose money at it. Let me illustrate.

"I knew a man once that was dead stuck on the drug store business. He wasn't a drug man himself, but he had the same idea about the drug business that many people have about the liquor business—that you can't fail to make money in it. He said to himself:

"'Why, here, there's 90 per cent. profit on drugs; it's pooty much all profit. You pay 10 cents a pound for stuff and sell it for 30 cents an ounce; and if I can gather in two or three small drug stores, why, I've got easy money.'

"And he did buy one drug store, and he got his 90 per cent. profit, all right; but he only sold about two dollars and a half's worth of stuff a day; and the total receipts wasn't enough to pay the store rent, to say nothing of leaving anything for him; and he could and never bought any more.

"It takes something more than a big percentage of profit in any business, you see, my son, to make a business pay. As I was saying a mindte ago, a business may be all profit and yet not be profitable: and that's the way it is in the burglary business.

"All is not gold that glitters. I've been into houses that looked most promising and found 'em only plated; and I've been into plenty of houses where they had the stuff put away in such shape that I couldn't get at it; and then I've been into plenty of houses where what I got really wouldn't pay my expenses for the day.

"And consider the days, or the nights, rather, when you can't do any business at all; bright moonlight nights, for instance, when you can't go abroad. Some men on such nights do go to pieces where the buildings are close together and where they can keep in the shadow, and so keep busy; but there's more men that lose by the moon a certain number of nights every month, when their exuenses, of course, are going on just the same, but with nothing whatever coming in.

"No, sir. The popular notion about the burglary business is all wrong. To begin with, it's only the men of real ability in it, just as it is in any other, that really make anything at it, anyway; the men of judgment and energy and persistence; the capable and hard and steady workers. The rest of 'em, like the majority of men in any line of business barely make a living at it, if they do that.

"Truly, whatever a man does get, if he gets anything, is all clean profit; but the profits are no good unless you get enough ofthem. It's like the drug business; the profits are all right, but you've got to do a business to make it pay."

LIFE IN A JAPAN PRISON

THE SYSTEM IS MORE HUMANE THAN OURS.

Ordinary Food is Rice—Horse Flesh is Given for Good Behaviour.

In Public Opinion is found a picture of the Japanese prison which seems to be far in advance of anything we have in this country. In place of for-bidding walls you see a large country house with a series of outbuildings, the prison itself being completely open, while the wooden bars at the windows have nothing of the forbidding aspect of our iron gratings.

The food given the prisoners is in proportion to their conduct and industry, the prisoners who do not conduct themselves as they should receiving a cake of rice which must last for seven days, while in the case of the orderly prisoners the same cake lasts for only four days. The prisoners who conduct themselves properly receive also a little horse meat, with potato or pea sauce with their meals.

The labor in the greatest of the Japanese at Itchigoi, is forced, but the buildings in which the work is performed, are clean and perfectly ventilated, and, in fact, are model workmen would appear all that could possibly be desired. Some prisoners are employed in hard work, such as the threshing of rice in primitive mills, but only the most robust are made to perform such service,

HOURS OF LABOR.

The hours for the hard labor are from seven to eight per day, the less strong inmates of the penitentiary being employed in weaving clothing for the prisoners out of a coarse, rose colored linen, while old people and the sick are seen on all sides calmly sorting out various kinds of paper. All of the prisoners teceive a portion of the profit derived from their labor, although this to a European would not be much.

The discipline which has been established in the various prisons is entirely military, and it should be stated that a prisoner is not considered a fallen creature or one to be excluded from society because of the fact that he has served his time. From a mortal and material standpoint there is no difference between a prisoner and a free man, and in the prisons every effort is made to elevate the inmates, all of the youths less than nineteen years of age passing two hours per day at school.

RETAINED AFTER SENTENCE.

In many cases prisoners when they have finished their sentences, remain in the prisons as domestics; there is also a curious legal provision which states that they can only leave the prison when surety is provided by parents or friends. Thus it may happen that a student of twenty-three years of age condemned to the prison for sixty days for the theft of a book, because of the fact that he has no one to go his security and thus be responsible for his release, remains buried for life in the prison The idea of the law is not unjust, however, much it may appear so, the purpose of the regulation being to assure the prisoner of a solid base on which to re-enter society. In order to remedy this condition little by little there have been formed societies which take in hand the cases of unprotected prisoners.

HOW IT HAPPENED.

He was in doubt.

On this particular evening he made up his mind that he would reach the point where doubt ends or know the reason why.

Thus it happened that he got a little closer to her than usual when he found that they were sitting side by side on the sofa.

"Do you ever think about marriage?" he asked.

"No," she replied.

Of course, that was a fib. Of course, he knew that it was a fib and she knew that he knew it. Consequently she wished that she hand't answered so hastily, but that is so customary in a woman that it should attract no attention.

"If I were a woman like you," he said, reproachfully, "I would think of it."

"Would you?" she inquired, carelessly.

"Yes, I would," he asserted, aggressively.

"Perhaps," she suggested, tantalizingly, "you wouldn't mind telling me just what course your thoughts would take—if you were a woman like me."

"I don't know that I can give the exact course of reasoning," he answered, fearful that he might be getting beyond his depth, "but if I were a woman like you I feel pretty reasonably sure that I would marry a man like—er—like me."

"You do?" she said, coloring a little, but still speaking in the same tantalizing tone.

"Yes, I do," he returned, doggedly.

"Well, if I were a man like you," she asserted, "I wouldn't expect a woman like me to do anything of the sort until a man like you had asked her to."

It is no trick at all to hold to the course of true love after the mariner once gets his bearings so long as the signal lights continue to burn, and thus it happened that their barque sped merrily on its way.