The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

Her self-possession and courage were coming back to her now. But the spasm of fear that had shaken her to the soul was not lost upon Steel.

"I trust not," he said, gravely. "Did you know that I was here two nights ago?"

"Here!" the girl cried. "Impossible! In the house! The night before last! Why, we were all in bed long before midnight."

"I am not aware that I said anything about midnight," David responded, coldly.

An angry flush came sweeping over the face of the girl, annoyance at her own folly, David thought. She added quickly that she and her uncle had only been down in Brighton for three days.

"Nevertheless, I was in this room two nights ago," David replied. "If you know all about it, I pray you give me certain information of vital importance to me; if not, I shall be compelled to keep my extraordinary story to myself, for otherwise you would never believe it. Do you or do you not know of my visit here?"

The girl bent her head till Steel could see nothing but the glorious amber of her hair. He could see, too, that the fine old lace round her throat was tossing like a cork on a stream.

"I can tell you nothing," she said. "Nothing, nothing, nothing."

It was the voice of one who would have spoken had she dared. With anybody else Steel would have been furiously angry. In the present case he could only admire the deep, almost pathetic, loyalty to somebody who stood behind.

"Are you sure you were in this house?" the girl asked at length.

"Certain!" David exclaimed. "The walls, the pictures, the furniture—all the same. I could swear to the place anywhere. Miss Gates, if I cannot prove that I was here at the time I name, it is likely to go very hard with me."

"You mean that a certain inconvenience——"

"Inconvenience! Do you call a charge of murder, or manslaughter at best, inconvenient? Have you not seen the local papers? Don't you know that two nights ago, during my absence from home, a strange man was practically done to death in my conservatory? And during the time of the outrage, as sure as Heaven is above us, I was in this room."

"I am sorry, but I am sure that you were not."

"Ah, you are going to disappoint me? And yet you know something. You might have been the guiltiest of creatures yourself when I disclosed my identity. No prisoner detected in some shameful crime ever looked more guilty than you."

The girl stood there, saying nothing. Had she rang the bell and ordered the footman to put him out of the house, Steel would have had no cause for complaint. But she did nothing of the kind. She stood there torn by conflicting emotions.

"I can give you no information," she said, presently. "But I am as positive one way as you are another that you have never been in this house before. I may surmise things, but as I hope to be judged fairly I can give you no information. I am only a poor, unhappy girl, who is doing what she deems to be the best for all parties concerned. And I can tell you nothing, nothing. Oh, won't you believe that I would do anything to serve you if I were only free?"

She held out her hand with an imploring gesture, the red lips were quivering, and her eyes were full of tears. David's warm heart went out to her; he forgot all his own troubles and dangers in his sympathy for the lovely creature in distress.

"Pray say no more about it," he cried. He caught the outstretched hand in his and carried it to his lips. "I don't wish to hurry you; in fact, haste is dangerous. And there is ample time. Nor am I going to press you. Still, before long you may find some way to give me a clue without sacrificing a jot of your fine loyalty to—well, others. I would not distress you for the world Miss Gates. Don't you think that this has been the most extraordinary interview?"

The tears trembled like diamonds on the girl's long lashes and a smile flashed over her face. The sudden transformation was wonderfully fascinating.

"What you might call an impossible interview," she laughed. "And all the more impossible because it was quite impossible that you could ever have been here before."

"When I was in this room two nights ago," David protested, "I saw——"

"Did you see me, for instance? If not, you couldn't have been here!"

A small, misshapen figure, with the face of a Byron—Apollo on the bust of a Satry—came in from behind the folding doors of the back dining-room carrying some letters in his hand. The stranger's dark, piercing eyes were fixed inquiringly upon Steel.

"Bell," the latter cried; "Hatherly Bell! you have been listening!"

The little man with the godlike head admitted the fact, cooly. He had been writing letters in the back room and escape had been impossible for him.

"Funny enough, I was going to look you up to-day," he said. "You did me a great service once, and I am longing to repay you. I came down here to give my friend Gates the benefit of my advice and assistance over a large philanthropic scheme he has just evolved. And, writing letters yonder on that subject, I heard your extraordinary conversation. Can I help you, Steel?"

"My dear fellow," David cried, "if you offered me every intellect in Europe I should not choose one of them so gladly as yours."

"Then let us shake hands on the bargain. And now I am going to stagger you; I heard you state positively that two nights ago you were in this very room."

"I am prepared to testify the fact on oath anywhere, my dear Bell."

"Very well; will you be good enough to state the hour?"

"Certainly. I was here from one o'clock—say between one and two."

"And I was here also. From eleven o'clock till two I was in this very room working out some calculations at this very table by the aid of my reading-lamp, no other light being in the room, oreven in the house, so far as I know. It is one of my fads—as fools call them—to work in a large, dark room with one brilliant light only. Therefore you could not possibly have been in the house to say nothing of this room, on the night in question."

David nodded feebly. There was no combating Bell's statement.

"I presume that this is No. 219?" he asked.

"Certainly it is," Miss Gates replied. "We are all agreed about that."

"Because I read the number over the fanlight," Steel went on. "And there was everything as I see it now. I came here by arrangement. And Bell, you must either cure me of this delusion, or you must prove logically to me that I have made a mistake. So far as I am concerned, I am like a child struggling with the alphabet."

"We'll start now," said Bell. "Come along."

Steel rose none too willingly. He would fain have lingered with Ruth. She held out her hand; there was a warm, glad smile on her face.

"May you be successful," she whispered. "Come and see me again, because I shall be very, very anxious to know. And I am not without guilt. If you only knew!"

"And I may come again?" David said, eagerly.

A further smile and a warm pressure of the hand were the only reply. Presently Steel was standing outside in the road with Bell. The latter was glancing at the house on either side of 219. The higher house was let; the one nearest the sea—218—was empty. A bill in the window gave the information that the property was in the hands of Messrs. Wallace and Brown, Station Quadrant, where keys could be obtained.

"We'll make a start straightaway," said Bell. "Come along."

"Where are you going to at that pace?" Steel asked.

"Going to interview Messrs. Wallace and Brown. At the present moment I am a gentleman who is in search of a house of residence, and I have a weakness for Brunswick Square in particular, especially for No. 218. Unless I am greatly mistaken I am going to show you something that will startle even the most callous novelist."

CHAPTER VIII.

The queer, misshapen figure striding along by Steel's side would have attracted attention anywhere; indeed, Hatherly Bell had been an attractive personality from his schooldays. A strange mixture of vanity and brilliant mental qualities, Bell had almost as many enemies as friends. He was morbidly miserable over the score of his personal appearance despite the extraordinary beauty of his face—to be pitied or even sympathized with almost maddened him. Yet there were many women who would gladly have shared the lot of Hatherly Bell.

For there was strength in that perfectly moulded face as well as beauty. It was the face of a man possessed of marvellous intellectual powers, and none the less attractive because, while the skin was as fair as a woman's and the eyes as clear as a child's the wavy hair was absolutely white. The face of a man who had suffered fiercely and long. A face hiding a great sorrow.

Time was when Bell had promised to stand in the front rank of operative physicians. In brain troubles and mental disorders he had distinguished himself. He had a marvellous faculty for [illegible] logical research; indeed, he had gone so far as to declare that insanity was merely a disease and capable of cure the same as any ordinary malady. "If Bell goes on as he has started," a great German specialist once declared, "he will inevitably prove to be the greatest benefactor to mankind since the beginning of the world." Bell was to be the man of his time.

And then suddenly he had faded out as a star drops from the zenith There had been dark rumors of a terrible scandal, a prosecution burked by strong personal influence, mysterious paragraphs in the papets, and the disappearance of the name of Hatherly Bell from the rank of great medical jurists. Nobody seemed to know anything about it, but Bell was ignored by all except a few old friends, and henceforth he devoted his attention to criminology and the evolution of crime. It was Bell's boast that he could take a dozen men at haphazard and give you their vices and virtues point-blank. He had a marvellous gift that way.

A few people stuck to him, Gilead Gates amongst the number. The millionaire philanthropist had need of someone to pick the sheep from the goats, and Bell made no mistakes. David Steel had been able to do the specialist some slight service a year or two before, and Bell had been pleased to magnify this into a great favor.

"You are a fast walker," David said, presently.

"That's because I am thinking fast," Bell replied. "Steel, you are in great trouble?"

"It needs no brilliant effort on your part to see that," David said, bitterly. "Besides, you heard a great deal just now when you—you——"

"Listened," Bell said, coolly. "Of course I had no intention of playing eavesdropper; and I had no idea who the Mr. Steel was who wanted to see Miss Gates. They come day by day, my dear fellow, garbed in the garb of Pall Mall or Petticoat Lane as the case may be, but they all come for money. Sometimes it is a shilling, sometimes £100. But I did not gather from your chat with Miss Gates what your trouble was."

"Perhaps not, but Miss Gates knew perfectly well."

Bell patted his companion, approvingly.

"It is a pleasure to help a lucid-minded man like yourself," he said. "You go straight to the root of the sore and cut all the superflious matter away. I was deeply interested in the conversation which I overheard just now. You are in great trouble, and that trouble is connected with 219, Brunswick Square—a house where you have never been before."

"My dear chap, I was in that dining-room two nights ago. Nothing will convince me to the——"

"There you are wrong, because I am going to convince you to the contrary. You may smile and shake your head, but before an hour has passed I am going to convince you beyond all question that you were never inside No. 219."

"Brave words," David muttered. "Still, an hour is not a long time to wait."

"No. But you must enlighten me if I am to assist you. I am profoundly interested. You come to the house of my friend on a desperate errand. Miss Gates is a perfect stranger to you, and yet the mere discovery of your identity fills her with the most painful agitation. Therefore, though you have never been in 219 before, you are pretty certain, and I am pretty certain, that Ruth Gates knows a deal about the thing that is touching you. On the contrary, I know nothing on that head. Won't you let me into the secret?"

"I'll tell you part," Steel replied. "And I'll put it pithily. For mere argument we assume that I am selected to assist a damsel in distress who lives at No. 219, Brunswick Square. We will assume that the conversation leading up to the flattering selection took place over the telephone. As a matter of fact, it did take place over the telephone. The thing was involved with so much secrecy that I naturally hesitated. I was offeered £1,000 for my services; also I was reminded by my unseen messenger that I was in dire need of that money."

"And were you?"

"My dear fellow, I don't fancy that I should have hesitated at burglary to get it. And all I had to do was to meet a lady secretly in the dead of night at No. 219, and tell her how to get out of a certain difficulty. It all resolved itself round the synopis of a proposed new story of mine. But I had better go into details."

David proceeded to do so. Bell, with his arm crooked through that of his companion, followed the story with an intelligent and flattering interest.

"Very strange and very dascinating," he said, presently. "I'll think it out presently. Nobody could possibly think of anything but their toes in Western Road. Go on."

"Now I am coming to the point. I had the money, I had that lovely cigar-case, and subsequently I had that battered and bleeding specimen of humanity dumped down in the most amazing manner in my conservatory. The cigar-case lay on the conservatory floor, remember—swept off the table when I clutched for the telephone bell to call for the police. When Marley came he asked if the cigar-case was mine. At first I said no, because, you see——"

"I see quite plainly. Pray go on."

"Well, I lose that cigar-case; I leave it in the offices of Mossa, to whom I pay yearly £1,000. Mossa, to spite me, takes or sends the case to the police, who advertise it not knowing that it is mine. You will see why they advertise it presently—'

"Because it belonged to the injured man eh?"

David pulled up and regarded his companion with amazement.

"How on earth—" he gasped. "Do you mean to say that you know—"

"Nothing at present, I assure you," Bell said, coolly. "Call it intuition, if you like. I prefer to call it the result of logical mental process. I'm right, of course?"

"Of course you are. I'd claimed that case for my own. I had cut my initials inside, as I showed Marley when I went to the police station. And then Marley tells me how I paid Mossa nearly £1,000; how the money must have come into my hands in the nick of time. That was pretty bad when I couldn't for the life of me give a lucid reason for the possession of those notes; but there was worse to come. In the pocket of the injured man was a receipt for a diamond-studded, gun-metal cigar-case, purchased the day of the outrage. And Walen, the jeweller, proved beyond a doubt that the case I claimed was purchesed at his shop."

Bell nodded gravely.

"Which places you in an exceedingly awkward position," he said.

"A mild way of putting it," David replied. "If that fellow dies the police have enough evidence to hang me. And what is my defence? The story of my visit to No. 219. And who would believe that cock-and-bull story? Fancy a drama like that being played out in the house of such a pillar of respectability as Gilead Gates."

"It isn't his house," said Bell. "He only takes it furnished."

"In anybody else your remark would be puerile," David said, irritably.

"It's a deeper remark than you are aware of at present," Bell replied. "I quite see your position. Nobody would believe you, of course. But why not go to the post-office and ask the number of the telephone that called you up from London?"

The question seemed to amuse David slightly. Then his lips were drawn humorously.

"When my logical formula came back I thought of that," he said. "On inquiring as to whom it was who rang me up on that fateful occasion I learnt that the number was 0017 Kensington and that——"

"Gates's own number at Prince's Gate," Bell exclaimed. "The plot thickens."

(To be Continued.)

AFRICAN SNAKESTONE.

Natives Persist in the Belief That It Absorbs Poison.

South Africans, as a rule, trouble themselves but little about snakes, although it is very well known that a few varieties are particularly deadly. Among the natives the properties of the "snakestone" have for many generations formed a centre of half superstitious credulity, and even by people who might be expected to know better, have been supposed to effect the most surprising cures of snakebite. An investigation of its properties by the government bacteriologists of Natal, who submitted an Indian snakestone to the test of applying it to animals infected with snake venom, has shown conclusively that its properties are quite mythical and that it does nothing that is claimed for it.

According to tradition the snakestone, which has absorbent qualities and which there is some reason to believe is frequently artificially prepared, is placed on the wound inflicted by the snake. There it is believed to suck out the poison, and has been said that if afterward placed in a bowl of milk the venom will exude and the milk turn blue.

In certain experiments narrated in The British Medical Journal, all these directions were followed. To the two rabbits injected, respectively with the venom of a black mamba, a very deadly South African coulbrine, and with puff adder venom, the snakestones was at once applied. The stone, by virtue of its absorbent nature, adhered to the wound, but here its adherence to tradition ended Both rabbits died, and, what was more disappointing, two other rabbits, used as a "control experiment," which were injected with the same amount of venom, recovered. Nor when the stone was placed in milk did the milk change color, though a slight quantity of it was absorbed.

The amount of absorption that the stone could possibly effect would be no more in hours than ordinary suction by the lips could achieve in a few minutes, and its only possible usefulness might be that of improving the physical condition of the patient by impressing him with the belief that a valuable remedy was being applied.

Nearly ten per cent. of children learn to walk by the time they are 10 months old.

Piet Cronje, the ex-Boer commandant, has been married, and we understand that the second Mrs. Cronje objects to her husband being described as a hero of a hundred engagements.

Pendennis—"I've made an awful mistake I sent a messenger boy up to Miss Cashley's with a lot of flowers, thinking it was her birthday, and now I learn that her birthday is to-morrow." Warington—"That's all right; the messenger boy may get there in time."

WHEN A ROWBOAT UPSETS.

How Best to Keep Yourself Afloat Till Saved.

If you are in a rowboat and it overturns, when you come to the surface and have yourself comfortably settled in the water, look about for the upturned boat or an oar, and if the closer of the two is not far away you can undoubtedly cover the distance by using your hands and by kicking gently with your legs, after alternately drawing them up about twice as much as for treading.

If you reach an oar, grasp it with your hands, placed about three feet apart. Then, just as if you were working pulleys in your room, alternately shove the oar in front of you at arm's length and pull it back to your chin. If your lung power is good and you observe the rule to breathe deeply and exhale scantily, you can easily keep afloat 20 minutes. Help out your hands by using your legs the best you know how; and religiously keep out of a standing position. By all means give the lungs opportunity to "take hold" in the water; in other words, to perform their work freely.

A capsized rowboat is ordinarily a splendid buoy. If you reach it, all you have to do to keep afloat indefinitely is to touch it with your hands. It is not necessary for you to try to scramble upon it. In the effort you may send it away from you, or release the air caught in it when it capsized, and thus cause it to sink. The safer plan is simply to rest your hands on it.

But if you were in a sloop or any sort of craft with rigging, keep away from the boat. If the sloop capsizes, your first move should be to get clear of the rigging, and after that to stay clear of it. I have known many a good swimmer to drown simply because he got foul of a boat's gear. Trust to your efforts alone; you will be in far less peril

WELL-MANNERED BURGLAR.

Left a Note of Regret in the House he Robbed.

A young man of 24, named Christopher Gregory, who pleaded guilty at the Clerkenwell Sessions, London recently, to having broken into the dwelling house of Thomas Foster Reid, at Warwick road, Paddington, left the following letter upon the dining room table:

Warwick Road, Maida-vale W.

Foster Reid, Esq.,

Sir,—No doubt you will be surprised to receive this note, but I take this means of finding a place to rest my head. I have been very unfortunate, and for the last 12 months I have been out of employment, and living goodness knows how.

I took an oath that the first day I was without food I would get into the hands of the police, and this is the first time I have been in want of food and shelter. I dare not sleep in tne open air, for my health is not the best. I am sorry for the damage done to the shutters, also to the tree in the garden.

I judged the height of the wall from outside, and, of course, had an unexpected fall, happily without any harm to myself. You will see that I helped myself to a little food, also a little wine, and for that I thank you.

I shall give myself up at the police station. I have taken a few articles to make up a case—a cigarette case and a card case—from the whatnot in the drawing room, a French coin (50 cents), and a jewel.

Again assuring you that my regret for damaging your house, but it had to be, and you will be doing me a service if you prosecute.—I am, sir, yours respectfully.

C. GREGORY.

The next day Gregory surrendered to the police. He is described as well educated and of good address.

SWINDLER MET HIS MATCH.

The classical confidence trick has been neatly played on a would-be swindler by his intended victim. The latter, a cook on a transatlantic liner, had been done himself before, and was too old a bird to be caught again. He struck up an acquaintance with an engaging but obviously sham American millionaire in the train to Paris, confiding to him that he had 40,000 francs in his bag, and meant to abuse himself on the boulevards.

"Well met, indeed," said the millionaire; "I have also made my pile and intend seeing the merry side of life in gay Paree." They started the evening with an expensive dinner, paid for by the American millionaire. At coffee the latter exclaimed: "Hullo, I have not any cigars; suppose you go and buy some. You can leave your bag here where it will be quite safe. But, as you might be suspicious, here's my pocketbook. Keep it till you join me again."

As soon as the cook's back was turned the American millionaire of course bolted with the bag, but the latter only contained old newspapers and the cook's card, with the words: "I have been here before; you have met your match this time." In the would-be swindler's pocketbook was a sum of £24 in French notes, which the cook took to the police station, asking the officer to whom he told his tale with understandable relish to give the money to the poor.

A young man thinks he is unworthy of the girl during courtship, but after marriage he soon discovers his error.