The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

CHAPTER XII.—(Continued.)

"The following morning the great discovery was made. The Van Sneck I have alluded to was an artist, a dealer, a man of the shadiest reputation whom my patron, Lord Littimer, had picked up. It was Van Sneck who produced the copy of 'The Crimson Blind.' Not only did he produce the copy, but he produced the history from some recently discovered papers relating to the Keizerskroon Tavern of the year 1656, which would have satisfied a more exacting man than Littimer. In the end the Viscount purchased the engraving for £800 English.

"You can imagine how delighted he was with his prize—he had secured and engraving by Rembrandt that was absolutely unique. Under more favorable circumstances I should have shared that pleasure. But I was face to face with ruin, and therefore I had but small heart for rejoicing.

"I came down the next morning after a sleepless night, and with a wild endeavor to scheme some way of getting the money to pay my creditor. To my absolute amazement I found a polite note from the lieutenant coldly thanking me for the notes I had sent him by messenger, and handing me a formal receipt for £800. At first I regarded it as a hoax. But, with all his queer ways, Von Gulden was a gentleman. Somebody had paid the debt for me. And somebody had, though I have never found out to this day."

"All the same, you have your suspicions?" Steel suggested.

"I have a very strong suspicion, but I have never been able to verify it. All the same, you can imagine what an enormous weight it was off my mind, and how comparatively cheerful I was as I crossed over to the hotel of Lord Littimer after breakfast. I found him literally beside himself with passion. Some thief had got in his room in the night and stolen his Rembrandt. The frame was intact, but the engraving had been rolled up and taken away."

"Very like the story of the stolen Gainsborough."

"No doubt the one theft inspired the other. I was sent off on foot to look for Van Sneck, only to find that he had suddenly left the city. He had got into trouble with the police, and had fled to avoid being sent to gaol. And from that day to this nothing has been seen of that picture."

"But I read to-day that it is still in Littimer Castle," said David.

"Another one," Bell observed. "Oblige me by opening yonder parcel. There you see is the print that I purchased to-day for £5. Then this, my friend, is the print that was stolen from Littimer's lodgings in Amsterdam. If you look closely at it you will see four dull red spots in the left-hand corner. They are supposed to be blood-spots from a cut finger of the artist. I am prepared to swear that this is the very print, frame and all, that was purchased in Amsterdam from that shady scoundrel Van Sneck."

"But Littimer is credited with having one in his collection," David urged.

"He has one in his collection," Bell said, coolly. "And, moreover, he is firmly under the impression that he is at present happy in the possession of his own lost treasure. And up to this very day I was under exactly the same delusion. Now I know that there have been two copies of the plate, and that this knowledge was used to ruin me."

"But," Steel murmured, "I don't exactly see——"

"I am just coming to that. We hunted high and low for the picture, but nowhere could it be found. The affair created a profound impression in Amsterdam. A day or two later Von Gulden went back to his duty on the Belgian frontier and business called me home. I packed my solitary portmanteau and departed. When I arrived at the frontier I opened my luggage for the Custom officer and the whole contents were turned out without ceremony. On the bottom was a roll of paper on a stick that I quite failed to recognise. An inquisitive Custom House officer opened it and immediately called the lieutenant in charge. Strange to say, he proved to be Von Gulden. He came up to me, very gravely, with the paper in his hand.

" 'May I inquire how this came amongst your luggage?' he asked.

"I could say nothing; I was dumb. For there lay the Rembrandt. The red spots had been smudged out of the corner, but there the picture was.

"Well, I lost my head then. I accused Von Gulden of all kinds of disgraceful things. And he behaved like a gentleman—he made me ashamed of myself. But he kept the picture and returned it to Littimer, and I was ruined. Lord Littimer declined to prosecute, but he would not see me and he would hear of no explanation. Indeed, I had none to offer. Enid refused to see me also or reply to my letters. The story of my big gambling debt, and its liquidation, got about. Steel, I was ruined. Some enemy had done this thing, and from that day to this I have been a marked man."

"But how on earth was it done?"

"For the present I can only make surmises." Bell replied. "Van Sneck was a slippery dog. Of course, he had found two of those plates. He kept the one back so as to sell the other at a fancy price. My enemy discovered this, and Van Sneck's sudden flight was his opportunity. He could afford to get rid of me at an apparently dear rate. He stole Littimer's engraving—in fact, he must have done so, or I should not have it at this moment. Then he smudged out some imaginary spots on the other and hid it in my baggage, knowing that it would be found. Also he knew that it would be returned to Littimer, and that the stolen plate could be laid aside and produced at some remote date as an original find. The find has been mine, and it will go hard if I can't get to the bottom of the mystery now. It is strange that your mysterious trouble and mine should be bound up so closely together, but in the end it will simplify matters, for the very reason that we are both on the hunt for the same man."

"Which man we have got to find, Bell."

"Granted. We will bait for him as one does for a wily old trout. The fly shall be the Rembrandt, and you see he will rise to it in time. But beyond this I have one or two important discoveries to-day. We are going to the house of the strange lady who owns 218 and 219, Brunswick Square, and I shall be greatly mistaken if she does not prove to be an old acquaintance of mine. There will be danger."

"You propose to to-night?"

"I propose to go at once," Bell said. "Dark hours are always best for dark business. Now, which is the nearest way to Longdean Grange?"

"So the house of the Silent Sorrow, as they call it, is to be our destination! I must confess that the place has ever held a strange fascination for me. We will go over the golf links and behind Ovingdean village. It is a rare spot for a tragedy."

Bell rose and lighted a fresh cigar.

"Come along," he said. "Poke that Rembrandt behind your books with its face to the wall. I would not lose that for anything now. No, on second thoughts I find I shall have to take it with me."

David closed the door carefully behind him and the two stepped out into the night.

CHAPTER XIII.

Two dancing eyes of flame were streaming up the lane towards the girls, a long shadow slanted across the white pathway, the steady flicks of hoofs drew nearer. Then the hoofs ceased their smiting of the dust and a man's voice spoke.

"Better turn and wait for us by the farm, driver," the voice said. "Bell, can you manage, man?"

"Who was that?" Enid whispered. "A stranger?"

"Not precisely," Ruth replied. "That is Mr. David Steel. Oh, I am sure we can trust him. Don't annoy him. Think of the trouble he is in for our sakes."

"I do," Enid said, drily. "I am also thinking of Reginald. If our dear Reginald escapes from the fostering care of the dogs we shall be ruined. That man's hearing is wonderful. He will come creeping down here on those flat feet of his, and that cunning brain will take in everything like a flash. Good dog!"

A hound in the distance growled, and then another howled mournfully It was the plaint of the beast who has found his quarry, impatient for the gaoler to arrive. So long as that continued Henson was safe. Any attempt at escape, and he would be torn in pieces. Just at the present moment Enid almost hoped that the attempt would be made. It certainly was all right for the present, but then Williams might happen along on his way to the stables at any moment.

The two men were coming nearer. They both paused as the dogs gave tongue. Through the thick belt of trees lights gleamed from one or two windows of the house. Steel pulled up and shuddered slightly in spite of himself.

"Crimson blinds," he said. "Crimson blinds all through this business. They are beginning to get on my nerves. What about those dogs, Bell?"

"Dogs or no dogs, I am not going back now," Bell muttered. "It's perfectly useless to come here in the daytime; therefore we must fall back upon a little amateur burglary. There's a girl yonder who might have assisted me at one time, but—"

Enid slipped into the road. The night was passably light and her beautiful features were fairly clear to the startled men in the road.

"The girl is here," she said. "What do you want?"

Bell and his companion cried out simultaneously: Bell because he was so suddenly face to face with one who was very dear to him, David because it seemed to him that he had recognized the voice from the darkness, the voice af his great adventure. And there was another surprise as he saw Ruth Gates side by side with the owner of that wonderful voice.

"Enid!" Bell cried hoarsely. "I did not expect——"

"To confront me like this," the girl, said, coldly. "That I quite understand. What I don't understand is why you intrude your hated presence here."

Bell shook his handsome head mournfully. He looked strangely downcast and dejected, and none the less, perhaps, because a fall in crossing the downs had severely wrenched his ankle. But for a belated cab on the Rottingdean road he would not have been here now.

"As hard and cruel as ever," he said. "Not one word to me, not one word in my defence. And all the time I am the victim of a vile conspiracy——"

"Conspiracy! Do you call vulgar theft a conspiracy?"

"It was nothing else," David put in, eagerly. "A most extraordinary conspiracy. The kind of thing that you would not have deemed possible out of a book."

"And who might this gentleman be?" Enid asked, haughtily.

"A thousand pardons for my want of ceremony," David said. "If I had not been under the impression that we had met before I should never have presumed——"

"Oh, a truce to this," Bell cried. "We are wasting time. The hour is not far distance, Enid, when you will ask my pardon. Meanwhile I am going up to the house, and you are going to take me there. Come what may, I don't sleep to-night until I have speech with your aunt."

David had drawn a little aside. By a kind of instinct Ruth Gates followed him. A shaft of grey light glinted upon her cycle in the grass by the roadside. Enid and Bell were talking in vehement whispers—they seemed to be absolutely unconscious of anybody else but themselves. David could see the anger and scorn on the pale, high-bred face; he could see Bell gradually expanding as he brought all his strength and firm power of will to bear.

"What will be the upshot of it?" Ruth asked, timidly.

"Bell will conquer," David replied. "He always does, you know."

"I am afraid you don't take my meaning, Mr. Steel."

David looked down into the sweet, troubled face of his companion, and thence away to the vivid crimson patches beyond the dark belt of foliage. Ever and anon the intense stillness of the night was broken by the long-drawn howl of one of the hounds. David remembered it for years afterwards. it formed the most realistic chapter of one of his most popular novels.

"Heaven only knows," he said. "I have been dragged into the business, but what it means I know no more than a child. I am mixed up in it, and Bell is mixed up in it, and so are you. Why we shall perhaps know some day."

"You are not angry with me?"

"Why, no. Only you might have had a little more confidence in me."

"Mr. Steel, we dared not. We wanted your advice, and nothing more. Even now I am afraid I am saying too much. There is a withering blight over yonder house that is beyond mere words. And twice gallant gentlemen have come forward to our assistance. Both of them are dead. And if we had dragged you, a total stranger, into the arena we should morally have murdered you."

"Am I not within the charmed circle now?" David smiled.

"Not of our free will," Ruth said, eagerly. "You came into the tangle with Hatherly Bell. Thank Heaven you have an ally like that. And yet I am filled with shame.

"My dear young lady, what have you to be ashamed of?"

Ruth covered her face with her hands for a moment and David saw a tear or two trickle through the slim fingers. He took the hands in his gently, tenderly, and glanced in to the fine, grey eyes. Never had he been moved to a woman like this before.

"But what will you think of me?" Ruth whispered. "You have been so good and kind and I am so foolish. What can you think of a girl who is all this way from home at midnight! It is so—so unmaidenly.'

"It might be in some girls, but not in you," David said, boldly. "One has only to look in your face and see that only the good and the pure dwell there. But were you not afraid?"

"Horribly afraid. The very shadows startled me. But when I discovered your errand to-night I was bound to come. My loyalty to Enid demanded it, and I had not one single person in the world whom I could trust."

"If you had only come to me, Miss Ruth——"

"I know, I know now. Oh, it is a blessed thing for a lonely girl to have one good man that she can rely upon. And you have been so very good, and we have treated you very, very badly."

But David would not hear anything of the kind. The whole adventure was strange to a degree, but it seemed to matter nothing so long as he had Ruth for company. Still, the girl must be got home. She could not be allowed to remain here, nor must she be permitted to return to Brighton alone. Bell strode up at the same moment.

"Miss Henson has been so good as to listen to my arguments," he said. "I am going into the house. Don't worry about me, but send Miss Gates home in the cab. I shall manage somehow."

David turned eagerly to Ruth.

"That will be best," he said. "We can put your machine on the cab, and I'll accompany you part of the way home. Our cabman will think that you came from the house. I sha'n't be long, Bell."

Ruth assented gratefully. As David put her in the cab Bell whispered to him to return as soon as possible, but the girl heard nothing of this.

"How kind—how kind you are," she murmured.

"Perhaps some day you will be kind to me," David said, and Ruth blushed in the darkness.

(To be Continued.)

TREATMENT BY DEPUTY

TRIAL PATIENTS FOR RICH INVALIDS.

Poor People Who Reap the First Fruits of Great Discoveries.

"The average human being has a pronounced objection to medical experiments being conducted on his own person, however salutary the results are expected to be."

So spoke a celebrated doctor to the writer of this article, and he added: "On innumerable occasions when a certain course of treatment is recommended to patients, who are at the same time both rich, sceptical, and perhaps nervous, they express a desire to watch the effects of the same treatment on another person before submitting to it themselves; and sometimes they have been known to put their hands in their pockets for large sums of money in order that they may be completely satisfied in this way."

Thus, a few weeks ago, according to the same authority, a new treatment for cancer was announced by a Continental doctor, which could only be properly tested at his own place in Germany. There was one case of

A RICH ENGLISH PATIENT,

who had tried all recognized methods of dealing with this terrible malady without success, and he was at this time not only sceptical as to anything new, but not well enough to make a long journey unless fairly well satisfied beforehand that there was at least a respectable chance of the results being satisfactory. His own doctors were also doubtful as to whether the evidence afforded justified taking such a course.

Accordingly the patient offered to pay all the expenses of any other poor sufferer whose case might be approved by his medical man as being very similar to his own, and to give him a bonus of $1,000 as well, on condition that he would proceed at once on a three months' course of this new treatment, and report weekly to his patron as to the results. The matter was arranged, a patient selected, and he is at the present time putting the treatment to the test, and reporting.

Again, a couple of years since, a middle-aged gentleman who is pretty well known in London society, and who had for a long time been living a very health-breaking sort of life, fell ill with a complication of maladies, and his doctor, when consulted, prescribed a very drastic and unpleasant course of treatment, which involved long abstention from almost everything which in the patient's opinion made life worth living. He declared that, however ill he was, he would like to see the effect of this sort of doctoring on some other person before he underwent such sacrifices on his own account.

A TRIAL THAT FAILED.

It so happened that a precisely similar case came under the attention of the medical man about the same time; but the patient was poor, and could not leave his work for such a long period as this treatment would involve. This being mentioned to the other, he took him into his own house, paid him a salary which was double what he had been getting, guaranteed him satisfactory employment afterwards, and settled all the doctor's fees for the treatment prescribed. Then he had the pleasure of watching its effects day by day, and studying them. In three weeks he was satisfied as to its efficacy.

But one of the most remarkable instances on record of this kind of thing was that afforded in the case of Mr. Rouss, the New York millionaire, who had lost his sight entirely by too much study of astronomy through a telescope at night. He was so overwhelmed by his terrible affliction that he offered a reward of $1,000,000 to any medical man who would discover a means of restoring to him the use of his eyes. The prize was a very tempting one. A poor man was discovered who was suffering from precisely the same disease of the optic nerve as Mr. Rouss and the latter engaged him, and rewarded him handsomely for submitting to a severe method of treatment which the oculists felt they would like to try, but with which they were afraid for many reasons of experimenting on the rich blind man. The pity of it was that it failed, and both had to remain in darkness; but the millionaire, grateful anyhow, to his fellow-sufferer, settled upon him a substantial pension for the rest of his life.

KOCH CURE WAS TRIED.

When the Koch treatment for consumption first came out and made a sensation a few years ago, there were thousands of poor people who were clamoring to go to Berlin and try it there; whilst, on the other hand, the more well-to-do, under the advice of home specialists, who were not at all satisfied about it, preferred to stay at home for the time being, although they were very curious as to the results that were being said to be achieved. Thus it happened that in quite a large number of cases poor consumptives were sent to Berlin, with all expenses paid by rich ones, merely that they might return home to report to the latter upon the benefit, if any, that they had received.

This kind of thing has its humorous side as well as the other. There are hangers-on to most hospitals who are willing to submit to any kind of medical or surgical treatment, not attended by absolute danger, for a consideration, and the adaptability of these persons is often surprising.

ILL TO ORDER.

One time a curious case of a very infrequent skin disease was submitted to a leading institution, and there were circumstances which made the staff hesitate about taking the surgical course which they felt was most likely to be efficient, after all. A trial was necessary beforehand, but such patients were scarce to the last degree. However, the doctor's perplexity became known to one of the hangers-on, and ten days later he came forward with the signs of this disease—not by any means a dangerous one—in full evidence upon him. How on earth he had managed to contract it in the time was then, and still remains, a mystery. He was operated upon, and cured immediately, receiving a suitable honorarium for the inconvenience to which he had been put; and then the other patient was taken in hand and similarly relieved.

"GIN-CHILD" IS COMMON

JUVENILE DRINKING IN LONDON, ENGLAND.

Diseased Livers are Common Among Three-year-old Children.

Inquiries among the hospitals and nursing sisters of London hardly bear out the evidence given before the Committee of Physical Deterioration on the subject of juvenile drinking, or what is known in some medicinal circles as "the gin-child."

Livers diseased by gin, according to Mr. F. Maurice, are common among children under three years old in hospitals, and several witnesses referred to the same evil.

In the children's ward of the London Hospital, however, only one case of "drunkard's liver" has been known. The patient was a boy of eight, and it is not at all certain whether this was due to inherited maladies or to the boy himself drinking spirits.

WHAT MOTHERS SAY.

It is practically impossible for the most sympathetic or experienced ward sister to find anything out from the parents on this point. According to the mother's account, every baby has been fed consistently on fresh milk from a dairy, and the other children have drunk nothing but water.

At the East London Hospital for Children, again, only one child has been brought in the worse for drink. This was a small boy who had found a bottle of rum on the table and drunk a large quantity of it; such a case can only be described as an accident.

Neither doctors nor sisters at either hospital can remember any other case in the children's ward directly attributable to drink, or even for certain indirectly so attributable. It must be remembered that the London Hospital is in the poorest quarter of London, and deals with twice as many children as any hospital in the city, except that in Great Ormond street.

That little children are given "nips" of beer and spirits is without a doubt. Everyone has seen the iniquity with his eyes; sick children are brought into a score of hospitals drowsy with soporifics. They wake up at night in the wards now and again calling for them.

BOY WANTED BRANDY.

A boy of eight in a hospital used to demand brandy constantly, and a ward sister in another narrates how a little twelve-year-old patient used to explain eagerly that her parents were not exactly drunkards, but they drank a good deal, and she could "do with" her glass too. But no evil effects apparently remain. The children sleep off their drowsiness, which is often caused by brandy administered for honest, if mistaken, medicinal reasons, and soon cease their clamor for these soothing doses.

It is highly probable that many cases of weak digestion complicating other illnesses, or a sudden collapse under pneumonia or some such common malady, may be due to a state of lowered resistance caused by alcohol; but hospital authorities do not care to commit themselves positively even to this modified statement. To the other assertion they oppose a flat denial.