The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

CHAPTER XXXIX.—(Continued)

"That's it," Merritt whined, brokenly. "Just as I was properly spoofing everybody as I—I mean just as I was getting used to a better life. But you can save me, miss; you can say as you were hard up for money and that knowing, as I knew the ropes, you got me to pawn it for you. Put it in that way and there's not a policeman in England as can touch me."

"I had thought of it," Chris said, with a pretty assumption of distress. "But, but—Mr. Merritt, I have a terrible confession to make. It was not I who started the police: it was somebody else. You see, the star was not my property at all. I—I got it in London."

Mr. Merritt looked up with involuntary admiration.

"You don't mean to say as you nicked it?" he asked. "Well, well."

Chris bent her face lower to conceal her agitation. Her shoulders were heaving, but not with emotion. The warmth of Merritt's admiration had moved her to silent laughter, and she had made the exact impression that she had desired.

"I have telegraphed to the lady, who is more or less of a friend of mine," she said. "I have urged her to take no further steps in the matter. I fancy that she is a good and kind girl and that—but a reply might come at any time."

There was a reply on the way now, as Chris knew perfectly well. The whole thing had been carefully arranged and planned to the moment by Steel and the others.

"I dare say they'll let you down easy," Merritt said, disconsolately; "but it'll be hot for me. I've copped it too many times before, you see."

"Yes, I see," Chris said, thoughtfully. "Mr. Merritt, I have made up my mind: if I had not—er—borrowed that star, it would not have been lost, and you would not have found it, and there would have been no trouble. My conscience would not rest if I allowed you to be dragged back into the old life again. I am going to save you—I am going to tell the police that you pawned that star for me at my instigation."

Merritt was touched even to tears. There was not an atom of chivalry in the rascal's composition. He had little or no heed for the trouble that his companion appeared to be piling up for herself, but he was touched to the depths of his soul. Here was a clever girl, who in her own way appeared to be a member of his profession, who was prepared to sacrifice herself to save another. Self-sacrifice is a beautiful and tender thing, and Merritt had no intention of thwarting it.

"Do that, and I'm your pal for life," he said, huskily. "And I never went back on a pal yet. Ask anybody as really knows me. Tain't as if you weren't one of us, neither. I'd give a trifle to know what your little game is here, eh?"

Chris smiled meaningly. Merritt's delusion was distinctly to be fostered.

"You shall help me then, presently," she said, in a mysterious whisper. "Help me and keep your own counsel, and there will be the biggest job you ever had in your life. Only let you and I get out of this mess, and we shall see what we shall see presently."

Merritt looked speechless admiration. He had read of this class of high-toned criminals in the gutter stories peddled by certain publishers, but he had never hoped to meet one in the flesh. He was still gazing open-mouthed at Chris as two men came along the avenue. They were both in plain clothes, but they had "policeman" writ large all over them.

"Cops, for a million," Merritt gurgled, with a pallid face. "You can tell 'em when you're asleep. And they are after me; they're coming this way, I'll be all right presently."

"I hope so," Chris said, with a curling lip. "You look guilty enough now."

Merritt explained that it was merely the first emotion, and would pass off presently. Nor did he boast in vain. He was quite cool as the officers came up and and called him by name.

"That's me," Merritt said. "What's the trouble?"

One of the officers explained. He had no warrant, he said, but all the same he would have to trouble Mr. Merritt to accompany him to Moreton Wells. A diamond star not yet definitely identified had been handed over to the police, the same having been pawned by James Merritt.

"That's quite right," Merritt said cheerfully. "I pawned it for this young lady here—Miss Lee. Of course, if it is not her property, why, then——"

The officers were palpably taken back. He knew more than he cared to say. The star had been pledged by Merritt, as he cheerfully admitted but the owner of the star had lost the gem in London under suspicious circumstances in which Miss Lee was mixed up. And at present it was not the policy of the police to arrest Miss Lee. That would come later.

"I am afraid that there has been a misapprehension altogether," Chris said. "Allow me to explain: Mr. Merritt, would you step aside for a moment? I have to speak of private matters. Thank you. Now, sir, I am quite prepared to admit that the ornament pledged does not belong to me, but to Miss Henson, whom I met in London. I took the star by mistake. You may smile, but I have one very like it. If Miss Henson had searched her jewels properly she would have found that she had my star—that I had hers. I heard of the business quite by accident, and telegraphed to Miss Henson to look searchingly amongst her jewels. She has a large amount, and might easily have overlooked my star. Here is a boy with a telegram. Will you take it from him and read it aloud? It is addressed to me, you will find.

It was. It was signed "Enid Henson"; it went on to say that the sender was fearfully sorry for all the trouble she had caused, but that she had found Miss Lee's star with her jewels. Also she had telegraphed at once to the police at Moreton Wells to go no farther.

"Looks like a mistake," the officer muttered. "But if we get that telegram——"

"Which has reached the police-station by this time," Chris interrupted. "Come into the castle and ask the question over the telephone. I suppose you are connected?"

The officer said they were; in fact, they had only recently joined the Exchange. A brief visit to the telephone, and the policeman came back, with a puzzled air and a little more deference in his manner, with the information that he was to go back at once, as the case was closed.

"I've seen some near things in my time, but nothing nearer than this," he said. "Still, it's all right now. Very sorry to have troubled you miss."

The officers departed with the air of men who had to be satisfied, despite themselves. Merritt came forward with an admiration almost fawning. He did not know quite how the thing had happened, but Chris had done the police. Smartness and trickery of that kind were the highest form of his idolatry. His admiration was nearly beyond words.

"Well, strike me," he gasped. "Did ever anyone ever see anything like that? You, as cool as possible and me with my heart in my mouth all the time. And there ain't going to be no trouble, no sort of bother over the ticket."

"You hand over the ticket to me," Chris smiled, "and there will be an end of the matter. And if you try to play me false in any way, why, it will be a bad day for you. Give me your assistance, and it will be the best day's work you ever did in your life."

Merritt's heart was gained. His price was touched.

"Me go back on you?" he cried hoarsely. "After what you've done? Only say the word, only give old Jim Merritt a call, and it's pitch-and-toss to manslaughter for those pretty eyes of yours. Good day's work! Aye, for both of us."

And Chris thought so too.

CHAPTER XL.

Waiting with the eagerness of the hound in leash, David Steel was more annoyed and vexed over the disappearance of the wounded Van Sneck than he cared to admit. He had an uneasy feeling that the unseen foe had checkmated him again. And he had built up so many hopes upon this strangely-uninvited guest of his. If that man spoke he could tell the truth. And both Cross and Bell had declared that he would not die.

David found Cross in a frame of mind something like his own. It was late in the afternoon before it transpired that Van Sneck was gone and, unfortunately, David did not know where to find Bell just at the moment. Cross had very little to say.

"A most unpleasant incident," he remarked. "But these things will happen. We have been so busy lately, and our vigilance has been slightly relaxed. Oh, it is impossible to guard against everything, but he is certain to be found."

"You don't think," David suggested, "that anybody secretly connected with the man's past——"

"No, I don't," Cross snapped; "that would be impossible. The man had something on his mind, and so far as bodily condition was concerned he was getting quite strong again. In his dazed state he got up and dressed himself and went away. He seems to have been seeking for somebody or something for days. We are certain to have him again before long."

With which poor consolation David returned home again. He was restless and desirous of human companionship. He even resented it, as a kind of affront, that his mother had chosen at this time to go to Hassocks to stay with an old friend for a couple of days. That Mrs. Steel knew practically nothing of her son's trouble counted for naught. Therefore it was with something akin to pleasure that David found Ruth Gates waiting in the drawing-room for him when he came in from his walk on the following afternoon. Nothing had been heard of Van Sneck in the meantime, but thanks to Chris's telephone message late the previous night he had got in touch with Bell, who was coming south without delay.

There was a look of shy pleasure in Ruth's eyes and a deep carmine flush on her cheeks.

"You don't think that this is very bold of me?" she asked.

"I am pretty Bohemian in any case," David laughed, as he looked down fondly into the shy, sweet eyes. "And I'm too overjoyed to see you to think about anything else. I wish my mother was at home. No, I don't, because I have you all to myself."

"David! On an occasion like this you ought to be the pink of propriety. Do you know, I believe that I have made a great discovery?"

"Indeed, little girl! And what have you found out?"

"Well, you must tell me something before my discovery seems valuable. David, you are a close student of human nature. Is it possible for men of phenomenal cunning to make careless mistakes? Do the most clever criminals ever make childish blunders?"

"My dear child, if they didn't the police would have very little chance. For instance, I have discovered how those enemies of ours got hold of the notepaper that lured Van Sneck here. They sent a messenger to Carter's, in East Street, presumedly knowing that my dies were there, and ordered a quarter of a team of paper and envelopes. These were to be sent to an address in East Grinstead in a hurry. Now, that was very clever and smart but here comes the folly. Those people, in the stress of business, actually forgot to ascertain the cost and pay for the paper, so that it was down yesterday in my last quarter's bill. Oh, yes, I assure you, the most brilliant criminals do the most incredibly foolish things."

Ruth looked relieved. Her pretty features relaxed into a smile.

"Then I fancy Reginald Henson has done so," she said. "I fancy I have solved the mystery of the cigar-case—I mean, the mystery of the one I bought."

"And which was changed for the one purchased at Walen's, hence these tears. But Lockhart's say that our case was really purchased by an American."

"Yes, I know. And I fancy that the manager honestly thought so. But I think I can explain that."

It was David's turn to look up eagerly.

"Do you mean it?" he exclaimed. "It will make a wonderful difference if you can. That has been one of the most bewildering knots of the whole puzzle. If we could only trace the numbers of those notes, I suppose changed at the same time as the cigar-case."

"Indeed they were not," Ruth cried. "I have ascertained that the case was changed by Henson as you and I have already decided. Henson made the exchange not at the time we thought."

"Not when you left the package on the table for him to see?"

"No; at least I can't say. He had the other case then, probably, passed on to him by Van Sneck. Or perhaps he merely ascertained what I had purchased. That was sufficient for his purpose. Of course he must have found out all about our scheme. After I had laid my cigar-case on your doorstep a man quietly changed it for the other purchased at Walen's. But this is the alternate theory only. Any way, I am absolutely certain that you got exactly the same notes that we had placed in the original case."

"That might be," David said, thoughtfully. "But that does not explain the fact that Lockhart's sold your case to an American at the Metropole."

"I fancy I can even explain that, dear. My uncle came down suddenly to-day from London. He wanted certain papers in a great hurry. Now those papers were locked up in a drawer at 219 given over specially to Mr. Henson. My uncle promptly broke open the drawer and took out the papers. Besides those documents the drawer contained a package in one of Lockhart's big linen-lined envelopes—a registered letter envelope, in fact. My uncle had little time to spare, as he was bound to be back in London to-night. He suggested that as the back of the drawer was broken and the envelope presumably contained valuables, I had better take care of it. Well, I must admit at once that I steamed the envelope open. I shouldn't have done so if Lockhart's name had not been on the flap. In a little case inside I found a diamond bracelet, which I have in my pocket, together with a receipted bill for seventy odd pounds made out to me."

"To you?" David cried. "Do you mean to say that——"

"Indeed I do. The receipt was made out to me, and with it was a little polite note to the effect that Messrs. Lockhart had made the exchange of the cigar-case for the diamond bracelet and that they hoped Miss Gates would find the matter perfectly satisfactory."

(To be Continued.)

DIPLOMATIC WOMAN.

Mrs Wise—"The new girl Mrs. Houskeep's got must be a jewel."

Mrs. Newcomb—"Why, she complains about her more than any of the others."

Mrs. Wise—"Of course, she wants the rest of us to think the girl isn't worth stealing."

IT WAS A HABIT.

He—"Queer habit Miss Passay has when you're talking to her."

She—"Doesn't she listen?"

He—"Oh, very attentively; but she keeps nodding her head and interjecting 'Yes, yes,' all the time."

She—"I think she has fallen into that habit waiting for some man to propose."

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I have used your No. 2 Incubator for three hatches, and am so well pleased with it that I ordered a No.3 which your agent, Mr. Tumbull, brought to-day. My third hatch came off yesterday with 112 chicks out of 119 eggs. We have also a Chatham Fanning Mill which gives good satisfaction. I will not lose an opportunity of recommending the Chatham machines to my friends. Yours respectfully, MRS. SIDNEY SMITH, Scotland, Ont.

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The No. 2 Incubator I bought from you is all you recommended it to be. I put in 101 eggs, and after testing out the infertile ones, I have 72 chicks. I find the machine first class in every particular and easy to run, if directions are followed carefully. Yours respectfully, MRS. HENRY CHASE, Warren, Ont.

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