The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

CHAPTER XLIV.—(Continued.)

"Then he went to see Dame Littimer, and from his own hand he drew what is known in our family as Prince Rupert's ring. He placed it in Dame Littimer's hand there to remain for a year and a day and when the year was up it was to be put aside for the bride of the heir of the house for ever, to be worn by her till a year and a day had elapsed after her first child was born. And that has been done for all time, my aunt, Lady Littimer, being the last to wear it. After Frank was born it was put carefully away for his bride. But the great tragedy came, and until lately we fancied that the ring was lost to us for ever. There is, in a few words, the story of Prince Rupert's ring. So far it is quite common property."

Enid ceased to speak for a time. But it was evident that she had more to say.

"An interesting story," David said. "And a pretty one to put into a book, especially as it is quite true. But you have lost the ring, you say?"

"I fancied so till to-night," Enid replied. "Indeed, I hardly knew what to think. Sometimes I imagined that Reginald Henson had it, at other times I imagined that it was utterly gone. But the mere fact that Henson possesses a copy practically convinces me that he has the original. As I said before, a true copy could not have been made from mere instructions. And if I could only get the original our troubles are all over."

"But I don't see how the ring has anything to do with——"

"With the family dishonor. No, I am coming to that. We arrive at the time seven years ago, when my aunt and Lord Littimer and Frank were all living happily at Littimer Castle. I told you just now that the Carfax estates adjoin the Littimer property. The family is still extant and powerful, but the feud between the two houses has never ceased. Of course, people don't carry on a vendetta these peaceful days, but the families have not visited for centuries.

"There was a daughter Claire, whom Frank Littimer got to know by some means or other. But for the silly family feud nobody would have noticed or cared, and there would have been an end to the matter, because Frank has always loved my sister Chris and we all knew that he would marry her some of these days.

"Lord Littimer was furiously angry when he heard that Frank and Claire had got on speaking terms. He imperiously forbade any further intercourse and General Carfax did the same. The consequence was that these two foolish young people elected to fancy themselves greatly aggrieved, and so a kind of Romeo and Juliet, Montague and Capulet, business sprang up. There were secret meetings, meetings entirely innocent, I believe, and a correspondence which became romantic and passionate on Claire Carfax's side. The girl had fallen passionately in love with Frank, whilst he regarded the thing as a mere pastime. He did not know then, indeed nobody seemed to know till afterwards, that there was insanity in the poor girl's family, though Hatherly Bell's friend, Dr. Heritage, who then had a practice near Littimer, warned us as well as he could. Nobody dreamt how far the thing had gone.

"Then those letters of Claire's fell into Lord Littimer's hands. He found them and locked them up in his safe. Frank, furious at being treated like a boy, swore to break open the safe and get his letters back. He did so. And in the same safe, and in the same drawer, was Prince Rupert's ring. When Lord Littimer missed the letters he missed the ring also and a large sum of money in notes that he had just received from his tenants. Frank had stolen the ring and the money, or so it seemed. I shall not soon forget that day.

"After taking the letters Frank had gone straight to Moreton Wells, and it looked for a little time as if he had fled. Within an hour of the discovery of his loss Lord Littimer met Claire Carfax on the cliffs. She was wearing Prince Rupert's ring. Frank had sent it to her, she said. Anybody but a man in a furious passion would have seen that the girl was not responsible for her actions. Littimer told her the true circumstances of the case. She laughed at him in a queer, vacant way and fled through the woods. She went down to the beach, where she took a boat rowed herself out into the bay. A mile or more from the shore she jumped into the water, and from that day to this nothing further has been seen of poor Claire Carfax."

"Or the ring, either?" David asked.

"Or the ring either. The same night Lady Littimer started after her boy. Littimer was going to have Frank prosecuted. Lady Littimer fled to Longdean Grange, where Frank joined her. Then my uncle turned up and there was a secene. It is said that Lord Littimer struck his wife, but Frank says that she fell against his gesticulating fist. Anyway, it was the same as a blow, and Lady Littimer dropped on the floor dragging a table down with her, flowers and china and all. You have seen that table in Longdean Grange. Since then it has never been swept or dusted or garnished. You have seen my aunt and you know what the shock has done for her—the shock and the steady persecutions of Reginald Henson."

"Who seems to be at the bottom of the whole trouble," said David. "But do you think that was the real ring on the poor girl's finger?"

"I don't. I fancy Henson had a copy made for emergencies. It was he who sent the copy to Claire, and it was the copy that Littimer saw on her hand. You see, directly Frank broke open that safe Henson, who was at the castle at the time, saw his opportunity—he could easily scheme some way of making use of it. If that plot against Frank had failed he would have invented another. And the unexpected suicide of Claire Carfax played into his hands. Henson has that ring somewhere, and it will be our task to find it."

"And when we have done so?"

"Give it to Lord Littimer and tell him where we found it. And then we shall be rid of one of the most pestilential rascals the world has ever seen. When you get back to Brighton I want you to tell this story to Hatherly Bell."

"I will," David replied. "What a weired, fascinating story it is! And the sooner I am back the better I shall be pleased. I wonder if our man is awake yet. If you will excuse me, I will go up and see. Ah!"

There was the sound of somebody moving overhead.

CHAPTER XLV.

At the same moment Williams came softly in. There was a grin of satisfaction on his face.

"The brute is fast asleep," he said. "I've just been in his room. He left the lamp burning, and there is a lump on the side of his head as big as an ostrich egg. But he didn't mean to go to sleep; he hasn't taken any of his clothes off. On the whole, sir, wouldn't it be better for you to wake our man up and get him away?"

David was of the same opinion. Van Sneck was lying on the bed looking vacantly about him. He seemed older and more worn, perhaps, because his beard and moustache were growing ragged and dirty on his face. He pressed his hand to his head in a confused kind of way.

"I tell you I can't find it," he said "the thing slipped out of my hand—a small thing like that easily might. What's the good of making a fuss about a ring not worth £20? Search my pockets if you like. What a murderous-looking dog you are when you're out of temper!"

All this in a vague, rambling way, in a slightly foreign accent. David touched him on the shoulder.

"Won't you come back with me to Brighton?" he said.

"Certainly," was the ready response; "you look a good sort of chap. I'll go anywhere you please. Not that I've got a penny of money left. What a spree it has been. Who are you?"

"My name is Steel. I am David Steel, the novelist."

A peculiarly cunning look came over Van Sneck's face.

"I got your letter," he said. "And I came. It was after I had had that row with Henson. Henson is a bigger scoundrel than I am, though you may not think it."

"I accept your statement implicitly," David said, drily.

"Well, he is. And I got your letter. And I called. And you nearly killed me. And I dropped it down in the corner of the conservatory."

"Dropped what?" David asked, sharply.

"Nothing," said Van Sneck, "What do you mean by talking about dropping things. I never drop anything in my life. I make others do that, eh, eh! But I can't remember anything. It just comes back to me and then there is a wheel goes round in my head. Who are you?"

David gave up the matter as hopeless. This was emphatically a case for Bell. Once let him get Van Sneck back to Brighton and Bell could do the rest.

"We'd better go," he said to Enid. "We are merely wasting time here."

"I suppose so," Enid said, thoughtfully. "All the same, I should greatly like to know what it is that our friend Van Sneck dropped."

It was a long and tedious journey back to Brighton again, for the patient seemed to tire easily, and he evinced a marked predilection for sitting by the roadside and singing. It was very late before David reached his house. Bell beamed his satisfaction. Van Sneck, with a half-gleam of recognition of his surroundings and with a statement that he had been there before, lapsed, into silence. Bell produced a small phial in a chemist's wrapper and poured the contents into a glass. With a curt command to drink he passed the glass over to Van Sneck.

The latter drank the small dose, and Bell carried him more or less to a ground-floor bedroom behind the dining-room. There he speedily undressed his patient and got him into bed. Van Sneck was practically fast asleep before his head had touched the pillow.

"I went out and got that dose with a view to eventualities," Bell explained. "I know pretty well what is the matter with Van Sneck, and I propose to operate upon him with the help of Heritage. I've put him in my bed and locked the door. I shall sleep in the big arm-chair."

David flung himself into a big deck lounge and lighted a cigarette.

"My word, that has been a bit of a business," he said. "Pour me out a little whiskey in one of the long glasses and fill it up with soda. Oh, that's better. I never felt so thirsty in my life. I got Van Sneck away without Henson having the slightest suspicion that he was there, and I had the satisfaction of giving Henson a smashing blow without his seeing me."

"Sounds like conjuring," Bell said, behind his cigar. "Explain yourself."

David went carefully into details. He told the story of Prince Rupert's ring to a listener who followed him with the most flattering attention.

"Of course, all this is new to me," Bell said, presently, "though I knew the family well up to that time. Depend upon it, Enid is right. Henson has got the ring. But how fortunately everything seems to have turned out for the scoundrel."

"If a man likes to be an unscrupulous blackguard he can make use of all events," David said. "But even Henson is not quite so clever as we take him to be. He has found out the trick we played upon him over Chris Henson, but he hasn't the faintest idea that all this time he has been living under the same roof at Littimer."

"The girl is a wonderful actress," Bell replied. "I only guessed who she was. If I hadn't known as much as I do she would have deceived me. But Henson has shot his bolt. After we have operated upon Van Sneck we shall be pretty near the truth. It is a great pull to have him in the house."

"And a nasty thing for Henson——'

"Who will find out before to-morrow is over. I feel pretty sure that this house is watched carefully. Any firm of private detectives would do that, and they need be told nothing either. I know that I was followed when I went to the chemist's to fetch that dose for our friend yonder. Still, it is a sign that Henson is getting frightened."

"Why do you bring Heritage into this matter?" David asked.

"Well, for a variety of reasons. First of all, Heritage is an old friend of mine, and I take a great interest in his case. I am going to give him a chance to recover his lost confidence, and he is a splendid operator. Besides, I want to know why Henson has gone out of his way to be so kind to Heritage. And, finally, Heritage was the family doctor of the Carfax people you just mentioned before he went to practise in London. Let me once get Heritage round again, and I shall be greatly disappointed if he does not give us a good deal of valuable information regarding Reginald Henson."

"And Cross. What about him?"

"Oh, Cross will do as I ask him. Without egotism, he knows that the case is perfectly safe in my hands. And if we care to look after Van Sneck, why, there will be one the less burden in the hospital. What a funny business it is! Van Sneck gets nearly done to death under this roof, and he comes back here to be cured again."

David yawned sleepily as he rose.

"Well, I've had enough of it for to-night," he said. "I'm dog-tired, and I must confess to feeling sick of the Hensons and Littimers, and all their works."

"Including their friend, Miss Ruth Gates?" Bell said, slily. "Still, they have made pretty good use of you, and I expect you will be glad to get back to your work again. At the same time, you need not trouble your head for plots for many a day."

David admitted that the situation had its compensations and went off to bed. Bell met him the next day as fresh as if he had had a full night's rest, and vouchsafed the information that the patient was as well as possible. He was cold and no longer feverish.

"In fact, he is ready for the operation at any time," he said. "I shall get Heritage here to dinner, and we shall operate afterwards with electric light. It will be a good steadier for Heritage's nerves, and the electric light is the best light of all for this business. If you have got a few yards of spare flex from your reading-lamp I'll rig the thing up without troubling your electrician. I can attach it to your study lamp."

"I've got what you want," David said. "Now come in to breakfast."

There was a pile of letters on the table, and on the top a telegram. It was a long message, and Bell watched Steel's face curiously.

"From Littimer Castle," he suggested. "Am I right?"

"As usual," David cried. "My little scheme over that diamond star has worked magnificently. Miss Chris tells me that she has—by Jove, Bell, just listen—she has solved the problem of the cigar-case; she has found out the whole thing. She wants me to meet her in London to-morrow, when she will tell me everything."

(To be Continued.)

TAXIDERMISTS' TRICKS.

How Snow, Ice, Rain and Mist Are Represented.

It is not until extraordinary settings are to be presented—winter scenes, rain scenes, or birds in flight, for instance—that the artist displays his best ingenuity and inventiveness. A group of musk oxen, for example, require a foot of snow. The beasts are shown, males, females and their calves, knee deep in snow, which is nothing cooler than granulated paraffine. The animals are startled and stop to gaze, but, as seen by their tracks, they have been rooting for the sparse grass beneath the heavy fall, and their snouts and faces show frozen snow dust—melted paraffine spattered with a stiff brush. If a scene with opaque ice is required, paraffin in sheets strikingly lends itself to the illusion. And as hoar frost is made, so is snow dust imitated.

A rain scene is artistically imitated by means of glycerine. Leaves of trees and twigs and shrubs are coated with this liquid, which, when thinly spattered over the fur of a mounted animal, looks exactly like fallen mist or condensed fog, or like early morning dew.

Birds in flight, like the larger animals, are mounted after instantaneous photographs. With wings and tail feathers spread, and with legs lying close, they appear to soar in a general direction, no two birds, however, being posed anywhere near alike, and even the angle of flight varying with the individual, as is made possible by their suspension with invisible platinum wires. Not only are such birds shown darting skyward from a thicket, but the ascent takes place from their hatching ground. The sand is thickly strewn with various nests—actual nests, stolen bodily—and here and there are broken shells showing where broods have been hatched. Here the tiny birds, still dependent upon their mothers, sit in nests, bills open awaiting a welcome contribution. Other young birds have managed to quit the paternal home, and are striking out for themselves among the shells on the sand.

PEACE AND WAR.

A strange museum has been founded at Lucerne, Switzerland. It is entitled the "Museum of Peace and War," and is intended as a complete history of war from the earliest times. The contents are warlike arms of all ages and nations, books, prints representing the horrors of war in their most realistic aspect, and everything that can throw a candid light upon a grim subject. The founder of the museum is M. Jean de Bloch, a wealthy Pole who is philanthropic, and perhaps a little eccentric, and he has chosen Lucerne for the site as being the place most likely to attract the largest number of cosmopolitan visitors.

ORCHESTRA OF MURDERERS.

At the French penal colony, Noumea, New Caledonia, the convicts have organized a band. The leader is a notorious murderer, and was once in the orchestra of the Paris Opera House. The cymbal-player killed a subpoena-server, and the drum-player murdered his landlord with a hammer. The first cornet is guilty of murder, with robbery as the motive, and one of the clarinets, a tavern-keeper, used to kill his patrons for the same reason. The assistant bandmaster was convicted of having cut his wife to pieces. This convict band gives daily concerts to the inhabitants of Noumea, who are enthusiastic over the new organization.

ISLAND OF BLACK CATS.

One of the queerest corners of the earth is Chatham Island, off the coast of Ecuador. This island lies 600 miles west of Guayaquil, and the Equator runs directly through it. Captain Reinman, who was sent to the Galapagos group of islands to inquire into the proper grounding of a deep-sea cable, stopped at Chatham Island, and says it abounds in cats, every one of which is black. These animals live in the crevices of the lava foundation near the coast, and subsist by catching fish and crabs instead of rats and mice. Other animals found on this island are horses, cattle, dogs, goats, and chickens, all of which are perfectly wild.

FRUIT NOVELTIES.

The new fruits perfected and introduced to the public during the present year outnumber those that made their appearance during the last quarter of a century. One of the latest novelties is the apple-pear, a combination fruit which many experienced growers who have seen it claim will become immensely popular in trade circles. It was obtained by grafting a pear branch into an apple stump. The fruit produced has the peel of an apple and the bell shape of a pear. It is of an extraordinary size, measuring 15 inches in circumference. The combination fruit possesses the combined flavors of the apple and pear.

IN MERRY OLD ENGLAND

NEWS BY MAIL ABOUT JOHN BULL AND HIS PEOPLE.

Occurrences in the Land That Reigns Supreme in the Commercial World.

Almost every loom in North and North-east Lancashire is now in full production.

The postal authorities are about to commence a motor mail service between Warwick and Birmingham.

The recent visit to Birmingham of the Coldstream Guards has given a remarkable stimulus to recruiting in that city.

The Postmaster-General has authorized the use of registered telegraphic addresses in sending wireless telegrams.

There are now in England and Wales 380 inspectors appointed under the Shop Hours Act, of whom nineteen are women.

"Send your energetic sons to Canada, and you will never regret it," said Lord Minto in receiving the freedom of Jedburgh.

By killing and dressing a bullock in twenty-eight and a half minutes, a butcher of Scunthrope, Lincolnshire, has won a wager of £5.

messrs. Robert Stephenson & Co., Limited, Darlington, have received an order for eighteen powerful locomotives for the Imperial railways of Japan.

At Mildenhall, Suffolk, a company has been formed which, for one shilling a year, insures watches against accident and theft up to the value of five pounds.

It is stated that owing to the depredations of tourists Lord Carnarvon contemplates closing his beautiful park at Highclere, near Newbury, to the general public.

Islington Borough Council will petition the Home Secretary to provide a bill for the establishment of separate courts to deal with all cases in which children are concerned.

The sume of $350 has been collected during the past year by ten dogs kept at various stations on the L. and S.W.R. The money goes to the company's servants' orphanage.

At the present rate of crumbling England will have been swallowed up by the sea in the year 12184, according to the calculations of a correspondent of the Frankfurter Zeitung.

In a private asylum in South London is a gentleman who believes himself to be General Stoessel. In the same institution there are already two Marshals Oyama and Mikadoes.

At sixteen years of age Miss May Emmett, of Blackburn, has obtained the highest distinction in England for pianoforte playing, the diploma of licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music.

By means of a new fast steamer service, instituted by the Lancashire and Yorkshire railway, between Goole and Copenhagen, record deliveries of Danish produce are being made to the Midlands and the north.

Wounded at the siege of Lucknow, retired from the 17th Lancers with a good conduct medal, having always lived an exemplary life, Henry William Smith has just passed away at Brighton. A grateful country allowed him to die in the workhouse.

CHILD TORTURE.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has a remarkable museum where, within a glass case, is a collection of implements of torture. Straps of every description are there, sticks, clubs, and ropes, with the knots still in them, that once held childish wrists fast. There are also twisted hooks, bamboo canes, and a chain with a padlock by which an imbecile child was for years fastened to a post. Hanging by itself is a straw basket two feet long and a foot deep in which twins were found on a baby farm.

IN A CRADLE AT SEVENTY.

There is a man of seventy in Paris named Wallace Superneau, who still sleeps in the cradle he was rocked in when a baby, and he has never slept one night of his long life in any other bed. The youngest of a family of boys, Wallace retained his place in the cradle as he grew older. He soon became too tall to lie in it full length, but he overcome this difficulty by drawing his knees upward. Each night to this day he rests his feet squarely on the bottom of the cradle, sways his knees to and fro, and rocks himself to sleep as he did when a small boy. The habit was formed in babyhood and never broken.

SOME SUGARY FACTS.

The total production of sugar throughout the world is about 2,000,000 tons per annum. Of this quantity nine-tenths are afforded by the sugar-cane, 25,000,000 tons of which are required to produce the above quantity of cane sugar. The average of saccharine matter in the ripe West Indian sugar-cane is from 18 to 21 per cent., of which only 8 per cent. is available to commerce. The total value of the sugar in the cane, if it could be extracted, would be about $200,000,000, but one-half is lost in the process of manufacture.

Ireland's bogs contain the equivalent of 5,000,000,000 tons of coal, according to the estimate of Sir Richard Sanhel.