The Price of Liberty

OR, A MIDNIGHT CALL

CHAPTER XLIX.—(Continued.)

But Chris was in no way cast down. She had carefully planned out her line of action, and the more she thought over it the more sure of success she felt. A few hours more and—but she didn't care to dwell too closely on that.

It was after luncheon that Chris's opportunity came. Lord Littimer and Grace Rawlins had gone off to inspect something especially beautiful in the way of a waterfall, leaving Chris and Rawlins alone. The latter was talking brilliantly over his cigarette.

"Is Lord Littimer any relation of yours?" he asked.

"Well, yes," Chris admitted. "I hope he will be a nearer relation before long."

"Oh, you mean to say—may I venture to congratulate——"

"It isn't quite that," Chris laughed, with a little rising in color. "I am not thinking of Lord Littimer, but of his son. Yes, I see you raise your eyebrows—probably you are aware of the story, as most people are. And you are wondering why I am on such friendly terms with Lord Littimer under the circumstances. And I am wondering why you should call yourself John Smith.

The listener coolly flicked the ash from his cigarette. His face was like a mask.

"John Smith is a good name," he said. "Can you suggest a better?"

"If you ask me to do so I can. I should call myself John Rawlins."

There was just the ghost of a smile on Rawlin's lips.

"There is a man of that name," he said, slowly, "who attained considerable notoriety in the States. People said that he was the derniere cri of refined rascality. He was supposed to be without feeling of any kind; his villainies were the theme of admiration amongst financial magnates. There were brokers who piously thanked Providence because Rawlins had never thought of going on the Stock Exchange, where he could have robbed and plundered with impunity. And this Rawlins always baffles the police. If he baffles them a little longer they won't be able to touch him at all. At present, despite his outward show, he has hardly a dollar to call his own. But he is on to a great coup now, and, strange to say, an honest one. Do you know the man, Miss Lee?"

Chris met the speaker's eyes firmly.

"I met him last night for the first time," she said.

"In that case you can hardly be said to know him," Rawlins murmured. "If you drive him into a corner he will do desperate things. If you tried that game on with him you would regret it for the rest of your life. Good heavens, you are like a child playing about amidst a lot of unguarded machinery. Why do you do it?"

"That I will tell you presently. Mr. Rawlins, you have a daughter."

The hard look died out of the listener's eyes.

"Whom I love better than my life" he said. "There are two John Rawlins's—the one you know; and, well, the other one. I should be sorry to show you the other one."

"For the sake of your daughter I don't want to see the other one."

"Then why do you pit yourself against me like this?"

"I don't think you are displaying your usual lucidity," Chris said, coolly. Her heart was beating fast, but she did not show it. "Just reflect for a moment. I have found you out. I know pretty well what you are. I need not have told you anything of this. I need have done no more than gone to the police and told them where to find you. But I don't want to do that; I hate to do it after what I saw last night. You have your child, and she loves you. Could I unmask you before her eyes?"

"You would kill her," Rawlins said, a little unsteadily; "and you would kill me, I verily believe. That child is all the world to me. I committed my first theft so that she could have the change the doctors declared to be absolutely necessary. I intended to repay the money—the old, old story. And I was found out by my employer and discharged. Thank goodness, my wife was dead. Since then I have preyed on society. But I need not go into that sordid story. You are not going to betray me?"

"I said before that I should do nothing of the kind."

"Then why do you let me know that you have discovered my identity?"

"Because I want you to help me. I fancy you respect my sex Mr. Rawlins?"

"Call me Smith, please. I have always respected your sex. All the kindness and sympathy of my life have been from women. And I can lay my hand on my heart and declare that I never yet wronged one of them in thought or deed. The man who is cruel to women is no man."

"And yet your friend Reginald Henson is that sort."

Rawlins smiled again. He began to understand a little of what was passing in Chris's mind.

"Would you mind going a little more into details?" he suggested. "So Henson is that sort. Well, I didn't know, or he had never had my assistance in his little scheme. Oh, of course, I have known him for years as a scoundrel. So he oppresses women."

"He has done so for a long time; he is blighting my life and the life of my sister and another. And it seems to me that I have that rascal under my thumb at last. You cannot save him—you can do no more than place obstacles in my way; but even those I should overcome. And you admit that I am likely to be dangerous to you."

"You can kill my daughter. I am in your power to that extent."

"As if I should," Chris said. "It is only Reginald Henson whom I want to strike. I want you to answer a few questions; to tell me why you went to Walen's and induced them to procure a certain cigar-case for you, and why you subsequently went to Lockhart's at Brighton and bought a precisely similar one."

Rawlins looked in surprise at the speaker. A tinge of admiration was on his face. There was a keenness and audacity after his own heart.

"Go on," he said, slowly. "Tell me everything openly and freely, and when you have done so I will give you all the information that lies in my power."

CHAPTER L.

"So Reginald Henson bullies women," Rawlins said, after a long pause. There was a queer smile on his face; he appeared perfectly at his ease. He did not look in the least like a desperate criminal whom Chris could have driven out of the country by one word to the police. In his perfectly-fitting grey suit he seemed more like a lord of ancient acres than anything else. "It is not a nice thing to bully women."

"Reginald Henson finds it quite a congenial occupation," Chris said, bitterly.

Rawlins pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"I am to a certain extent in your power," he said. "You have discovered my identity at a time when I could sacrifice thousands for it not to be known that I am in England. How you have discovered me matters as little as how a card-player gets the ace of trumps. And I understand that the price of your silence is the betrayal of Henson?"

"That is about what it comes to," said Chris.

"In the parlance of the lower type of rascal, I am to 'round on my pal'?"

"If you like to put it in that way, Mr. Smith."

"I never did such a thing in my life before. And, at the same time, I don't mind admitting that I was never so sorely tried. At the present moment I am on the verge of a large fortune, and I am making my grand coup honestly. Would you deem it exaggeration on my part if I said that I was exceedingly glad of the fact?"

"Mr. Smith," Chris said, earnestly, "I have seen how fond you are of your daughter."

"That is an exceedingly clever remark of yours, young lady," Rawlins smiled. "You know that you have found the soft spot in my nature, and you are going to hammer on it till you reduce me to submission. I am not a religious man, but my one prayer is that Grace shall never find me out. When my coup comes off I am going to settle in England and become intensely respectable."

"With Reginald Henson for your secretary, I suppose?"

"No, I am going to drop the past. But to return to our subject. Are you asking me to betray Henson to the police?"

"Nothing of the kind," Chris cried, hastily. "I—I would do anything to avoid a family scandal. All I want is a controlling power over the man.

"The man who bullies women?"

"The same. For seven years he has wrecked the lives of five of us—three women. He has parted husband and wife, he has driven the man I love into exile. And the poor wife is gradually going hopelessly mad under his cruelties. And he blackmails us, he extorts large sums of money from us. If you knew what we have suffered at the hands of the rascal!"

Rawlins nodded in sympathy.

"I did not imagine that," he said. "Of course, I have known for years that Henson was pretty bad. You may smile, but I have never had any sympathy with his methods and hypocritical ways, perhaps because I never did anything of the kind myself. Nobody can say that I ever robbed anybody who was poor or defenceless or foolish. By heavens, I am a more honest man than hundreds of London and New York capitalists. It is the hard rogues amongst us who have always been my mark. But to injure and wound women and children!"

"Which means that you are going to help me?" Chris asked, quietly.

"As far as I can, certainly. Especially as you are going to let Henson down easily. Now please ask me any questions that you like."

"This is very good of you," said Chris. "In the first place, did you ever hear Mr. Henson speak of his relations or friends?"

"Nobody beyond Lord Littimer. You see, Henson and I were extremely useful to one another once or twice, but he never trusted me, and I never trusted him. I never cared for his methods."

"Did you go to Brighton lately on purpose to help him?"

"Certainly not. I had business in Brighton for some considerable time, and my daughter was with me. When she went away to stay with friends for a short time I moved to the Metropole."

"Then why did you go to Walen's in Brighton and ask them to show you some gun-metal cigar-cases like the one in Lockhart's window?"

"Simply because Henson asked me to. He came to me just before I went to the Metropole and told me he had a big thing on. He didn't give me the least idea what it was, nor did I ask him. He suggested the idea of the cigar-case, and said that I need not go near Walen's again, and I didn't. I assure you I had no curiosity on the matter. In any case a little thing like that couldn't hurt me. Some days later Henson came to me again and asked me to go to Lockhart's and purchase the cigar-case I had previously seen. He wanted me to get the case so that I could not be traced. Again I agreed. I was leaving the Metropole the next day, so the matter was easy. I called and purchased the cigar-case on approval, I forwarded dollar-notes in payment from the Metropole, and the next day I left."

"And you did all that without a single question?"

"I did. It was only a little consideration for an old confederate."

"And suppose that confederate had played you false?"

Two tiny points of flame danced in Rawlins's eyes.

"Henson would never have dared," he said. "My mind was quite easy on that score."

"I understand," Chris murmured. "And you kept the cigar-case?"

"Yes, I rather liked it. And I could afford a luxury of that kind just then."

"Then why did you dispose of it to Rutter's in Moreton Wells? And why Moreton Wells?"

Rawlins laughed as he lighted a fresh cigarette.

"I came to Moreton Wells knowing that Henson was at Littimer Castle," he explained. "I went there to borrow £200 from Henson. Unfortunately I found him in great need of money. Somebody who had promised him a large sum of money had disappointed him."

Chris smiled. She had heard all about Lady Littimer's adventure with the ring, and her stubborn refusal to give Henson any further supplies.

"Presently I can tell you who disappointed Henson," she said. "But fancy you being short of——"

"Of ready money; I frequently am. One of your great millionaires told me lately that he was frequently hard up for a thousand pounds cash. I have frequently been hard up for five pounds. Hence the fact that I sold the cigar-case at Moreton Wells."

"Well, the ground is clear so far," said Chris. "Do you know Van Sneck?"

"I know Van Sneck very well," Rawlins said, without hesitation. "A wonderfully clever man."

"And a great scoundrel, I presume?"

"Well, on the whole, I should say not. Weak, rather than wicked. Van Sneck has been a tool and creature of Henson's for years. If he could only keep away from the drink he might make a fortune. But what has Van Sneck got to do with it?"

"A great deal," Chris said, drily. "And now, please, follow carefully what I am going to say. A little time ago we poor, persecuted women put our heads together to get free from Reginald Henson. We agreed to ask Mr. David Steel, the well-known novelist, to show us a way of escape. Unhappily for us, Henson got to know of it."

Rawlins was really interested at last.

"Pardon me," he said, eagerly, "if I ask a question or two before you proceed. Is Mr. David Steel the gentleman who found a man half murdered in his house in Brighton?"

"The same. But don't you know who the injured man was?"

"You don't mean to say it was Van Sneck?" Rawlins cried.

Chris nodded gravely. Rawlins looked like a man who was groping about in a sudden dazzle of blinding light.

"I begin to understand," he muttered. "The scoundrel!"

"After that I will resume," Chris said. "You must understand that Mr. Steel was a stranger to us. We hit upon the idea of interviewing him anonymously, so to speak, and we were going to give him a gun-metal cigar-case mounted in diamonds. A friend of mine purchased that cigarcase at Lockhart's. Mind you, Reginald Henson knew all about this. The same day Henson's tool, Van Sneck, purchased a similar case from Walen's—a case really procured for your approval—and later on in the day the case passed from Van Sneck to Henson, who dexterously changed the cases."

"Complex," Rawlins muttered. "But I begin to see what is coming.

"The cases were changed, and the one from Walen's in due course became Mr. Steel's. Now note where Henson's diabolical cunning comes in. The same night Van Sneck is found half murdered in Mr. Steel's house, and in his pocket is the receipt for the very cigar-case that Mr. Steel claimed as his own property."

"Very awkward for Steel," Rawlins said, thoughtfully.

"Of course it was. And why was it done? So that we should be forced to come forward and exonerate Mr. Steel from blame. We should have had to have told the whole story, and then Henson would have learnt what steps we were taking to get rid of him."

Rawlins was quiet for some time. Admiration for the scheme was uppermost in his mind, but there was another thought that caused him to glance curiously at Chris.

"And that is all you know?" he asked.

"Not quite," Chris replied. "I know that on the day of the attempted murder Van Sneck quarelled with Reginald Henson, whom he said had treated him badly. Van Sneck had in some way found out that Reginald Henson meant mischief to Mr. Steel. Also he couldn't get the money he wanted. Probably he had purchased that cigar-case at Walen's and Henson could not repay him for the purchase of it. Then he went off and wrote to Mr. Steel, asking the latter to see him, as he had threatened Henson he would do."

"Ah!" Rawlins exclaimed, suddenly. "Are you sure of this?"

(To be Continued.)

YOUNG FOLKS

COOKIN' THINGS.

When my mother's cookin' things
You bet I never wait
To put away my ball er gun—
I drop 'em where they are an' run
Fer fear I'll be too late.
The most exciting kind o' game
Er toy, er storybook,
I let 'em go, an' never mind,
The very minute that I find
My mother's goin' to cook.

When my mother's cookin' things,
P'r'aps it's pies to bake,
Er doughnuts bobbin' up an' down
In boilin' grease till they are brown,
Er p'r'aps it's Johhnny cake.
Whatever kind of thing it is,
I always like to hook
The biggest piece of dough I can
An' bake it in a patty-pan,
When me an' mother cook.

—Burges Johnson.

THE FINDING OF TIMOLEEN.

"I am sure this is the most dreadful birthday any little girl ever had!" said Mildred, as she and Aunt Judith stood before the stove in a dingy little station far away in British Columbia.

The train had been three hours late. It was past eleven, and pouring in torrents.

"Can you get us a carriage?" asked Aunt Judith of the sleepy-looking station-master.

"Not to-night, ma'am."

"How far is it to the village?"

"Nearly three miles, ma'am."

"Three miles from the village, rain, wind and Egyptian darkness! Not a very pleasant prospect for a walk!" laughed Aunt Judith.

"O aunty, what ever in the world shall we do?" cried Mildred.

"Stay here all night, I suppose," said Aunt Judith, who had travelled all over Europe and Asia, and was never daunted by any ordinary difficulty.

"Yes, ma'am," said the station-master, "that's just what you'll have to do. It is not very comfortable here, but at any rate there will be a roof over your head, and that's a great thing on a night like this."

There were two rickety settees in the room. Aunt Judith made a nest of shawls upon one of them for Mildred, and settled herself upon the other. Soon the south-bound train steamed noisily in, but left no passengers; and when it had gone, the station-master took his hat and coat and the lantern and went out, saying he would return at six in the morning.

"O aunty," cried Mildred, "he has left us in the dark!"

"The light from the stove is enough. We shall sleep all the better," said Aunt Judith.

"But, O aunty, he has locked the door! He has locked us in?" cried Mildred, in dismay.

"No matter," laughed Aunt Judith. "He will unlock us bright and early to-morrow morning."

How the wind howled! How the rain dashed against the windows! One window had a broken pane, and they could hear the water dripping, dripping, down the wall to the floor.

"What a dreadful birthday!" sighed Mildred.

Just then she heard a noise at the broken window and raised herself on her elbow to listen. What could it be? Was it a tramp? Was it a burglar? Was it a bear?

Again came the noise. First a scratching, then a scrambling, and then something small and white bounded into the room, and jumped up on Mildred, whining and licking her hands.

Mildred sprang up with a scream of delight.

"Oh, you darling, darling thing! Oh, you sweet, dear wee bit of a doggy! O Aunt Judith, did you ever, ever see such a cunning little doggy?"

They carried him to the stove and examined him by the faint light of the dying coals.

"A very valuable silver Yorkshire," said Aunt Judith.

"See his tiny black nose and his little pink tongue," said Mildred, "and just feel how soft and silky he is. And oh, do look at his lovely silver collar and his blue ribbon!"

"Perhaps we shall find his owner's name upon the collar," said Aunt Judith. "Keep still, you mite, and let me see."

But the collar bore only the one word, "Timoleen."

Mildred was dancing with joy. "O Timoleen, darling, you must have come to be my birthday present!" said she.

She fed him with bits of chicken and cake from their lunch-basket, and then cuddled down in the shawls again with him clasped tightly in her arms. "What a perfectly beautiful birthday!" said she.

When the station-master returned in the morning he said that the Yorkshire must have belonged to some one on the south-bound train, and that probably inquiries would be made for him.

"But O my darling Timoleen! I could never, never let him go!" cried Mildred.

"Are you going to be round here long?" asked the station-master.

"About a month," said Aunt Judith.

"Well, then, missy, you had better take the little dog along with you, and you can leave me your address in case any one inquires for him," said the station-master.

But no message ever came from the Yorkshire's owner, and when Mildred went back to Boston little Timoleen went, too.

A CONSIDERATE JUDGE.

Rarely does a judge show hesitancy in the court-room, or a disposition to change his mind when he has once publicly expressed it; but an account of a refreshing exception is furnished by Sir Henry Hawkins, Lord Brampton, the eminent English justice, in a recent book of reminiscences.

Baron Martin, whose native leniency and sense of fun often placed him at the mercy of the very men he was trying, was once about to sentence an old offender, charged with a petty theft.

"Look," said the baron, with an assumption of severity, "I hardly know what to do, but you can take six months."

"I can't take that, my lord; it's too much," said the prisoner, respectfully but firmly. "I can't take it. Your lordship sees I didn't steal very much, after all."

The baron indulged in one of his low, chuckling laughs before replying.

"Well, that's vera true; ye didn't steal much," he said. "Well, then, ye can tak' four months. Will that do—four months?"

"Nay, my lord, but I can't take that, neither," said the witness, patiently.

"Then tak' three."

"That's nearer the mark, my lord," the prisoner said, approvingly. "But I'd rather you made it two, if you will be so kind."

"Vera well, then, tak' two," said the judge, with the air of one who is pleased to have done the right thing at last "And, mind, don't come again; if you do I'll givo ye—well, it all depends!"

TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

An eminent English surgeon, whose brusqueness with grown-ups recalls that of the famous Abernethy, is quite another person when children are his patients. Then he is as amiable as an angel or a big St. Bernard dog.

A short time ago, according to St. James's Budget, this gentle giant got up out of a warm bed at three o'clock of a bitter morning to attend a tiny boy in piteous plight from diphtheria. He performed the operation of tracheotomy and saved the child's life.

Time went on and his general condition improved, but there was one disquieting symptom. He refused to use his voice. When he was questioned he nodded or shook his head, but would not speak. Finally the surgeon found a way. One morning he talked at his stubborn little patient.

"I'm sorry he can't speak to me, nurse," the surgeon said, "because I'm going up to London to-morrow, and sha'n't know whether to bring him a horse or a gun."

There was a brief silence. The surgeon and nurse waited breathlessly. Then a tiny finger stole up to a wounded throat, and the ghost of a baby boy's voice said:

"Please, doctor, bwing me a lickle gun!"

NOBODY WANTS THEM.

You can find lots of people willing to share your joys, but you cannot even give away your sorrows as souvenirs.