

Prince Rupert's Ring;

OR, THE HOUSE OF THE SILENT SORROW.

CHAPTER III.—(Cont'd)

"Ah," the voice cried, "ah, if you could only tell me that! Let me ruffian only imagine that I am dead; let him have proofs of it, and the thing is done. I could reach him then. Tell me how I can die, disappear, leaving that one man to believe I am no more. How can it be done?"

"In my pocket I have a clipping from the Times, which contains a chapter from the history of a medical student who is alone in London. It closely resembles my plot. He says he has no friends, and he deems it prudent for reasons we need not discuss to let the world assume that he is dead. He disguises himself and goes to a doctor of repute, whom he asks to come and see his brother—i. e., himself—who is dangerously ill. The doctor goes later in the day and finds his patient in bed with severe internal inflammation. This is brought about by a free use of albumen. I don't know what amount of albumen one would take without extreme risk, but you could pump that information out of any doctor. Well, our medical man calls again and yet again, and finds his patient sinking. The next day, the patient, disguised, calls upon his doctor with the information that his 'brother' is dead. The doctor is not in the least surprised, and without going to view the body gives a certificate of death. Now, I admit that all this sounds cheap and theatrical, but you can't get over facts. The thing actually happened a little time ago in London."

"A thousand thanks," the voice cried, passionately. "Some day I may be able to thank you face to face, to tell you how I managed to see your plot. May I?"

The question came quite eagerly, almost imploringly.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," he said. "And may you be successful. Good-night."

"Good-night, and God bless you for a real gentleman and a true friend. I will go out of the room first and put the lights up afterwards. You will walk away and close the door behind you. And once more good-night, but let us hope not good-bye."

She was gone. Steel could hear the distant dying swish of silk, the rustling of the portiere, and then, with a flick, the lights came up again. Half-blinded by the sudden illumination Steel fumbled his way to the door and into the street. As he did so Hove Town Hall clock chimed two. With a cigarette between his teeth David made his way home.

He was home at last. But surely he had closed the door before he started? He remembered distinctly trying the latch. And here the latch was back and the door open. The quick snap of the electric light declared nobody in the dining-room. Beyond the study was in darkness. Nobody there, but—stop!

A stain on the carpet; another by the conservatory door. Pots of flowers scattered about, and a huddled mass like a litter of empty sacks in one corner. Then the huddled mass resolved itself into the figure of a man with a white face smeared with blood. Dead! Oh, yes, dead enough.

Steel flew to the telephone and rang furiously.

"Give me 52, Police Station," he cried. "Are you there? Send somebody at once up here—15 Downend Terrace. There has been murder done here. For Heaven's sake come quickly."

CHAPTER IV.

For some time—a minute, an hour—Steel stood over the dreadful thing huddled upon the floor of his conservatory. Just then he was incapable of consecutive ideas.

His mind began to move at length. The more he thought of it the more absolutely certain he was that he had fastened the door before leaving the house. True the latch was only an ordinary one and

a key might easily have been made to fit it. As a matter of fact, David had two, one in reserve in case of accidents. The other was usually kept in a jewel-drawer of the dressing-table. Perhaps—

David went quietly upstairs. It was just possible that the murderer was in the house. But the closest search brought nothing to light. He pulled out the jewel drawer in the dressing-table. The spare latch-key had gone!

Then there was a rumbling of an electric bell. The hall light streamed on a policeman in uniform and an inspector in a dark overcoat and a hard felt hat. On the pavement was a long shallow tray, which David recognized mechanically as the ambulance.

"Something very serious, sir?" Inspector Marley asked. "I've brought the doctor with me."

David nodded. Both the inspector and the doctor were acquaintances of his. He closed the door and led the way into the study. Just inside the conservatory and not far from the huddled figure lay David's new cigar-case. Doubtless, without knowing it, the owner had whisked it off the table when he had sprung the telephone.

"Um," Marley muttered. "Is this a clue, or yours?"

He lifted the case with its diamonds gleaming like stars on a dark night. David had forgotten all about it for the time, had forgotten where it came from, or that it contained £250 in bank-notes.

"Not mine," he said. "I mean to say, of course it is mine. A recent present. The shock of this discovery has deprived me of my senses pretty well."

Marley laid the cigar-case on the table. It seemed strange to him, who could follow a tragedy calmly, that a man should forget his own property. Meanwhile Cross was bending over the body. A quick exclamation came from the doctor.

"A drop of brandy here, and quick as possible," he commanded.

"You don't mean to say," Steel began; "you don't—"

Cross waved his arm impatiently. The brandy was procured as speedily as possible. Steel, watching intently, fancied that he detected a slight flicker of the muscles of the white, stark face.

"Bring the ambulance here," Cross said, curtly. "If we can get this poor chap to the hospital there is just a chance for him. Fortunately, we have not many yards to go."

"I should like to have your explanation, sir," Marley said.

"Positively, I have no explanation to offer," David replied. "About midnight I let myself out to go for a stroll, carefully closing the door behind me. Naturally, the door was on the latch. When I came back an hour or so later, to my horror and surprise, I found those marks of a struggle yonder and that poor fellow lying on the floor of the conservatory."

"Was the door fast on your return?"

"No, it was pulled to, but it was open all the same."

"You didn't happen to lose your latch-key during your midnight stroll, sir?"

"No, it was only when I put my key in the door that I discovered it to be open. I have a spare latch-key, when I went to look for it just now the key was not to be found. When I came back the house was perfectly quiet."

"What family have you, sir? And what kind of servants?"

"There is only myself and my mother, with three maids. You may dismiss any suspicion of the servants from your mind at once. My mother trained them all in the old vicarage where I was born, and not one of the trio has been with us less than twelve years."

"That simplifies matters somewhat," Marley said. "Apparently your latch-key was stolen by somebody who has made careful study of your habits. Do you generally go for late walks after your household has gone to bed, sir?"

David replied somewhat grudgingly that he had never done such a thing before.

"Well, it's a bit of a puzzle to me," Marley admitted.

"My impression is that somebody who knows the ways of the house watched me depart," said David. "Then he lured his victim in here under pretence that it was his own house—he had the purloined latch-key—and murdered him."

Marley asked if he had had some appointment elsewhere tonight.

"No," David replied, "I hadn't." He prevaricated without hesitation.

"I'll run round to the hospital and come and see you again in the morning, sir," Marley said.

"I'll come as far as the hospital with you," said Steel.

At the bottom of the flight of steps they encountered Dr. Cross and the policeman. The former handed over to Marley a pocket-book and some papers, together with a watch and chain taken from the wounded man.

"He was stabbed twice in the back in the region of the liver," said Cross. "He may recover, but it will be a long time before he is in a position to say anything for himself. Good-night, Mr. Steel."

David went indoors. Mechanically, he counted out the bank-notes, and almost as mechanically he cut his initials on the gun-metal inside the cigar-case.

He snapped the lights out and went to bed at last. But not to sleep. The welcome dawn came at length and David took his bath gratefully. He would have to tell his mother what had happened, suppressing all reference to the Brunswick Square episode. It was not a pleasant story but Mrs. Steel assimilated it at length over her early tea and toast.

"It might have been you, my dear," she said, placidly. "And indeed, it is a dreadful business. But why not telephone to the hospital and ask how the poor fellow is?"

The patient was better, but was still in an unconscious condition.

CHAPTER V.

Steel swallowed a hasty breakfast and hurried off townwards. He had £1,000 packed away in his cigar-case, and the sooner he was free from Beckstein the better he would be pleased. He came at length to the offices of Messrs. Mossa and Mack, whose brass-plate bore the legend that they were solicitors. As David strode into the offices of the senior partner that individual looked up with a shade of anxiety in his deep, Oriental eyes.

"If you have come to offer terms," he said, "I am sorry—"

"To hear that I have come to pay you in full," David said; "£974. 16s. 4d. up to yesterday, which is every penny you can rightfully claim. Here it is. Count it."

Mr. Mossa counted the money carefully and wrote a receipt and

David strode out of the office with the remains of his small fortune rammed into his pocket. He had forgotten his cigar-case, and it was some little time before Mr. Mossa saw it.

"Our friend is in funds," he muttered. "Well, he shall have a dance for his cigar-case. I'll send it up to the police-station and say that some gentleman or other left it here by accident. And if Steel comes back we can say that there is no cigar-case here. And if Steel does not see the police advertisement he will lose his pretty toy."

Mr. Mossa proceeded to put his scheme into execution whilst David strolled along the sea front, took a steamer ride to Eastbourne and returned home at night.

Steel passed into his study and lighted a cigarette. By the way, where was the cigar-case? It would be just as well to lock the case away till he could discover some reasonable excuse for its possession. But the cigar-case was not to be found, and David was forced to the conclusion that he had left it in Mossa's office.

A little annoyed he took up the evening Argus. There was half a column devoted to the strange case at Downend Terrace, and just over it a late advertisement to the effect that a gun-metal cigar-case had been found and was in the hands of the police awaiting an owner.

David slipped from the house and caught a 'bus in St. George's Road.

At the police station he learnt that Inspector Marley was still on the premises. Marley came forward gravely. He had a few questions to ask, but nothing to tell.

"And now perhaps you can give me some information?" David said. "You are advertising in tonight's Argus a gun-metal cigar-case set with diamonds."

"Ah," Marley said eagerly, "can you tell us anything about it?"

"Nothing beyond the fact that I hope to satisfy you that the case is mine."

Marley stared open-mouthed at David for a moment, and then relapsed into his sapless official manner.

"Why this mystery?" David asked. "I lost it this morning, and I suspect I left it at the office of Mr. Mossa."

"The case was sent here by Mr. Mossa himself," Marley admitted. "Then of course, it is mine. You know the case, Marley—it was lying on the floor of my conservatory last night."

"I did notice a gun-metal case there," Marley said.

"As a matter of fact, you called my attention to it and asked if it was mine."

"And you said at first that it wasn't, sir."

"Well, you must make allowances for my tenuous frame of mind," David laughed. "I gather from your manner that somebody else has been after the case; if that is so, you are right to be reticent. Still, it is in your hands to settle the matter on the spot. All you have to do is to open the case, and if you fail to find my initials, D. S., scratched in the left-hand top corner, then I have lost my property and the other fellow has found his."

In the same reticent fashion Marley proceeded to unlock a safe in the corner, and from thence he produced what appeared to be the identical cause of all this talk. He pulled the electric table lamp over to him and proceeded to examine the inside carefully.

"You are quite right," he said. "Your initials are here. And it has been some time in your possession, sir?"

"Oh, confound it, no. It was—well, it was a present from a friend for a little service rendered. I understand it was purchased at Lockhart's, in North Street. No, I'll be hanged if I answer any more of your questions, Marley. Your queries are distinctly impertinent."

"Do I understand you decline to account for the case?"

"Certainly I do."

"You are placing yourself in a very delicate position Mr. Steel."

David started at the gravity of the tone.

"What on earth do you mean?" he cried.

(To be continued.)

FITTED.

Customer—"You guaranteed a fit, didn't you?"

Tailor—"I did."

Customer—"Well, the only fit about these clothes was the one my wife had when she saw 'em."

She—Papa asked what your intentions were last evening, George. He—Didn't say anything about his own, did he?

Little Willie—Oh, Uncle George, did you bring your horn? Uncle George—My horn? Why, I have no horn. Little Willie—Then I wonder what papa meant when he said you were off on a toot last week.

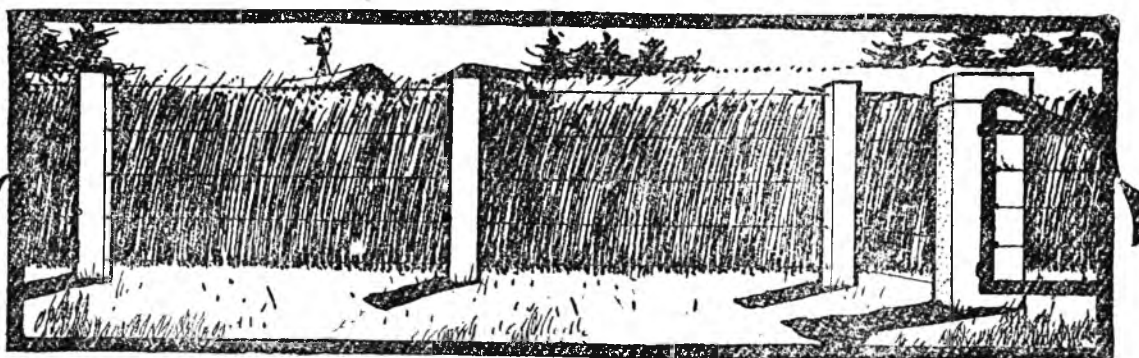
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