

Prince Rupert's Ring;

OR, THE HOUSE OF THE
SILENT SORROW.

CHAPTER V.—(Cont'd)

"Well, it's this way, sir. When I pointed out the case to you lying on the floor of your conservatory last night you said it wasn't yours. You looked at it with the eyes of a stranger, and then you said you were mistaken. From information given last night I have been making inquiries about the cigar-case. You took it to Mr. Mossa's, and from it you produced notes to the value of nearly £1,000 to pay off a debt. Within eight-and-forty hours you had no more prospect of paying that debt than I have at this moment. Of course, you will be able to account for those notes. You can, of course?"

"We will discuss that when the proper time comes," Steel said, with fine indifference.

"As you please sir. From information also received I took the case to Walen's, in West Street, and asked Mr. Walen if he had seen the case before. Pressed to identify it, he handed me a glass and asked me to find the figures (say) '1771. x. 3,' in tiny characters on the edge. I did so by the aid of the glass, and Mr. Walen further proceeded to show me an entry in his purchasing ledger which proved that a cigar-case in gun-metal and diamonds bearing that legend had been added to the stock quite recently—a few weeks ago, in fact."

"Well, what of that?" David asked, impatiently. "For all I know, the case might have come from Walen's. I am not going to deny that Walen was right."

"Pressed as to when the case had been sold, Mr. Walen, without hesitation, said: 'Yesterday, for £72 15s.' The purchaser was a stranger, whom Mr. Walen is prepared to identify. Asked if a formal receipt had been given, Walen said that it had. And now I come to the gist of the whole matter. You saw Dr. Cross hand me a mass of papers, etc., taken from the person of the gentleman who was nearly killed in your house?"

David saw the gulf looming before him.

"Go on," said he, hoarsely. "go on. You mean to say that—"

"That amongst the papers found in the pocket of the unfortunate stranger was a receipted bill for the very cigar-case that lies here before you?"

CHAPTER VI.

Steel dropped into a chair and gazed at Inspector Marley with mild surprise. At the same time he was not in the least alarmed.

"Walen is quite sure?" he asked.

"Yes, he recognized his private mark at once."

"May I smoke a cigarette?" David asked.

"You may smoke a score if they will be of any assistance to you, sir," Marley replied. "I don't want to ask you any questions and I don't want you—well, to commit yourself."

"As a puzzling case," said David. "You have handled it with skill. You might have been a pupil of my remarkable acquaintance Hatherly Bell."

"I am a pupil of Mr. Bell's," Marley said, quietly.

"Curious you should mention Mr. Bell's name, seeing that he was here so recently as this afternoon."

"Staying in Brighton?" Steel asked, eagerly. "What is his address?"

"No. 219 Brunswick Square."

It took all the nerve that David possessed to crush the cry that rose to his lips. It is more than strange that the man he most desired to see at this juncture should be staying in the very house where the novelist had his great adventure. And in the mere fact might be the key to the problem of the cigar-case.

"I'll certainly see Bell," he muttered. "What do you intend to do, Marley?"

"For the present, nothing," Marley replied. "So long as the man in the hospital remains unconscious I can do no more."

David bade Marley good-night and went home to study over the case. His train of thought was

broken as an idea came to him. It was not so long since he had a facsimile cigar-case in his hand at Lockhart's, in North Street. Somebody connected with the mystery must have seen him admiring it and reluctantly declining the purchase, because the voice from the telephone told him that the case was a present and that it had come from the famous North Street establishment.

"By Jove!" David cried. "I'll go to Lockhart's to-morrow and see if the case is still there. If so, I may be able to trace it."

Early the next morning David was in North Street. The gentlemanly assistant at Lockhart's remembered Steel and the cigar-case, but he was afraid that the article had been sold. No doubt it would be possible to obtain a facsimile in the course of a few days.

"Only I required that particular one," Steel said. "Can you tell me when it was sold and who purchased it?"

The assistant recalled it had passed into the hands of an American gentleman staying at the Metropole.

"Can you tell me his name?" David asked, "or describe him?"

"Well, I can't, sir," the junior partner said, frankly. "I can only remember the name was John Smith. If there is anything wrong—"

David hastily gave the desired assurance. He wanted to arouse no suspicion.

Not for one moment did Steel believe in the American at the Metropole. As he walked thoughtfully homewards he was debating in his mind whether or not he might venture to call at or write to 219 Brunswick Square, and lay his difficulties before the people there. He sat in his own room puzzling the matter out till his head ached. He looked round for inspiration. His eye fell on the telephone and he jumped to his feet.

"What a fool I am!" he exclaimed. "If I had been plotting this business out as a story, I should have thought of that long ago. . . . No, I don't want any number, at least, not in that way. Two nights ago I was called up by somebody from London who held the line for fully half an hour or so. I've—I've forgotten the address of my correspondent, but if you can ascertain the number. . . . yes, I shall be here if you will ring me up when you have got it. . . . Thanks."

Half an hour passed before the bell trilled again. David listened eagerly. At an- rate, now he was going to know the number whence the mysterious message came—0017, Kensington, was the number. David muttered his thanks and flew to his big telephone directory. Yes, there it was—'0017, 446 Prince's Gate, Gilead Gates."

"Gilead Gates," he murmured when he had thanked the operator. "Quaker, millionaire, and philanthropist. One of the most highly esteemed and popular men in England. And from his home came the message which has been the source of all the mischief. And yet there are critics who say the plots of my novels are too fantastic!"

CHAPTER VII.

The emotion of surprise seemed to have left Steel altogether. After the last discovery he was prepared to believe anything.

"I'll go to Brunswick Square and see that woman," David said to himself. "Money or no money, I'll not lie under an imputation like this."

There was one thing to be done beforehand, and that was to see Dr. Cross.

"Oh, the man is better," Cross said cheerfully. "He hasn't been identified yet, though the press has given us every assistance. I fancy the poor fellow is going to recover, though I am afraid it will be a long job."

David walked the whole distance to 219 Brunswick Square. He knocked at the door with a vague

feeling of uncertainty. A staid, old-fashioned footman answered his ring and inquired his business.

"Can—can I see your mistress?" David stammered.

The staid footman became, if possible, a little more reserved. If the gentleman would send in his card he would see if Miss Ruth was disengaged.

"I'm afraid I haven't a card," he said. "Will you say that Mr. Steel would like to see—er—Miss Ruth for a few minutes? My business is exceedingly pressing."

The staid footman led the way into the dining-room. Nothing had been altered. The same plain, handsome, expensive furniture was here, the same mahogany and engravings, the same dull red walls, with the same light stain over the fireplace—a dull, prosperous, square-toed-looking place.

"You wanted to see me, sir? Will you be so good as to state your business?"

David turned with a start. He saw before him a slight, graceful figure, and a lovely, refined face in a frame of the most beautiful hair that he had ever seen.

"I—I, eh, yes," Steel stammered. "You see, I—if I only knew whom I had the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am Miss Ruth Gates, at your service. Still, you asked for me by name."

"Daughter of the famous Gilead Gates?" David asked.

"No, niece, and housekeeper. This is not my uncle's own house, he has merely taken this for a time. But, Mr. Steel—"

"Mr. David Steel—is my name familiar to you?"

"I—I know you quite well by reputation," the girl gasped. Her little hands were pressed to her left side as if to check some deadly pain there. "Indeed, I may say I have read most of your stories. I—I hope that there is nothing wrong."

"I trust not," he said, gravely. "Did you know that I was here two nights ago?"

"Here!" the girl cried. "Impossible! In the house! The night before last! Why, we were all in bed long before mid-night."

"I am not aware that I said anything about midnight," David responded coldly. "If you know all about it, I pray you to give me certain information of vital importance to me; if not, I shall be compelled to keep my extraordinary story to myself, for otherwise you would never believe it. Do you or do you not know of my visit here?"

The girl bent her head till Steel could see nothing but the glorious amber of her hair.

"I can tell you nothing," she said. "Nothing, nothing, nothing. Are you sure you were in this house?"

"Certain!" David exclaimed. "The walls, the pictures, the furniture—all the same. I could swear to the place anywhere, Miss Gates, if I cannot prove that I was here at the time I name, it is likely to go very hard with me."

"You mean that a certain inconvenience—"

"Inconvenience! Do you call a charge of murder, or manslaughter at best, inconvenient? Have you not seen the local papers? Don't you know that two nights ago, during my absence from home, a strange man was practically done to death in my conservatory? And during the time of the outrage, as sure as Heaven is above us, I was in this room."

"I am sorry, but I am sure that you were not."

"Ah, you are going to disappoint me? And yet you know something. No prisoner detected in some shameful crime ever looked more guilty than you."

The girl stood there, saying nothing.

"I can give you no information," she said, presently. "But I am as positive one way as you are another that you have never been in this house before. I may surmise things, but as I hope to be judged fairly I can give you no information. I am only a poor, unhappy girl, who is doing what she deems to be the best for all parties concerned. And I can tell you nothing, nothing. Oh, won't you believe that I would do anything to serve you if I were only free?"

"When I was in this room two nights ago," David protested, "I saw—"

"Did you see me, for instance? If not, you couldn't have been here."

A small, misshapen figure, with the face of a Byron came in from behind the folding doors at the back of the dining-room carrying some letters in his hand. The stranger's dark, piercing eyes were fixed inquiringly upon Steel.

"Bell," the latter cried; "Hatherly Bell! you have been listening!"

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The little man admitted the fact, coolly. He had been writing letters in the back room and escape had been impossible for him.

"Funny enough, I was going to look you up to-day," he said. "You did me a great service once, and I am longing to repay you. I came down here to give my friend Gates the benefit of my advice and assistance over a large philanthropic scheme he has just evolved. And writing letters yonder on that subject, I heard your extraordinary conversation. Can I help you, Steel?"

"My dear fellow," David cried, "if you offered me every intellect in Europe I should not choose one of them so gladly as yours."

"Then let us shake hands on the bargain. And now I am going to stagger you; I heard you state positively that two nights ago you were in this very room."

"I am prepared to testify the fact on oath anywhere, my dear Bell."

"Very well; will you be good enough to state the hour?"

"Certainly. I was here from one o'clock—say between one and two."

"And I was here also. From eleven o'clock till two I was in this very room working out some calculations at this very table by the aid of my reading-lamp. Therefore you could not possibly have been in the house, to say nothing of this room."

David nodded feebly. There was no combating Bell's statement.

"I presume that this is No. 219?" he asked.

"Certainly it is," Miss Gates replied. "We are all agreed about that."

"Because I read the number over the fanlight," Steel went on. "And I came here by arrangement. And there was everything as I see it now. Bell, you must either cure me of this delusion, or you must prove logically to me that I have made a mistake. So far as I am concerned, I am like a child struggling with the alphabet."

"We'll start now," said Bell. "Come along."

Steel rose none too willingly. He would fain have lingered with Ruth. She held out her hand; there was a warm, glad smile on her face.

"May you be successful," she whispered. "Come and see me again, because I shall be very very anxious to know. And I am not without guilt. . . . If you only knew!"

"And I may come again?" David said, eagerly.

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