

Prince Rupert's Ring;

OR, THE HOUSE OF THE
SILENT SORROW.

CHAPTER VIII.

Time was when Bell had promised to stand in the front rank of operative physicians. In brain troubles and mental disorders he had distinguished himself. He had a marvelous faculty for psychological research; indeed, he had gone so far as to declare that insanity was merely a disease and capable of cure the same as any ordinary malady.

And then suddenly he had faded out as a star drops from the zenith. There had been dark rumors of a terrible scandal, a prosecution lurked by strong influence, mysterious paragraphs in the papers, and the disappearance of the name of Hatherly Bell from the rank of great medical jurists. Nobody seemed to know anything about it, but Bell was ignored by all except a few old friends, and henceforth he devoted his attention to criminology and the evolution of crime. It was Bell's boast that he could take a dozen men at haphazard and give you their vices and virtues point-blank.

A few people stuck to him, Gilead Gates amongst the number. David Steel had been able to do the specialist some slight service a year or two before, and Bell had been pleased to magnify this into a great favor.

"Steel, you are in great trouble," said Bell.

"It needs no brilliant effort on your part to see that," David said bitterly. "Besides you heard a great deal just now when you—"

"Listened," Bell said, coolly. "But I did not gather from your chat with Miss Gates what your trouble was."

"Perhaps not, but Miss Gates knew perfectly well."

"What Miss Gates knows I am unable to say. But this much I do know. You were not in the dining room of No. 219 two nights ago. I am profoundly interested but if I am to aid you, you should tell me everything."

David proceeded to do so as they walked along.

"Steel, I am going to enjoy this ease," said Bell, when David finished.

"You're welcome to all the fun you can get out of it," David said, grimly. "So far as I am concerned, I fail to see the humor. Isn't this the office you are after?"

Bell nodded and disappeared, presently to return with two exceedingly rusty keys tied together with a drab piece of tape. He jingled them on his long, slender forefinger with an air of positive enjoyment.

"Now come along," he said. "We will go back to Brunswick Square exactly the same way as you approached it on the night of the great adventure."

"On the evening in question you were particularly told to approach the house from the sea front," said Bell.

"Somebody might have been on the look-out near the Western Road entrance," Steel suggested.

"Possibly. I have another theory. . . . Here we are. The figures over the fanlights run from 187 upwards, gradually getting to 219 as you breast the slope. At one o'clock in the morning every house would be in darkness. Did you find that to be so?"

"I didn't notice a light anywhere till I reached 219."

"Well, here is 218, where I propose to enter, and for which purpose I have the keys. Come along."

David followed wondering. The houses in Brunswick Square are somewhat irregular in point of architecture and Nos. 218 and 219 were the only matched pair thereabouts. Signs were not wanting, as Bell pointed out, that at one time the houses had been occupied as one residence. The two entrance-halls were back to back, so to speak, and what had obviously been a doorway leading from one to the other had been plastered up within comparatively recent memory.

David pointed out that there were no cobwebs on the first floor, though there were many elsewhere.

"To you note another singular point?" Bell asked.

"No," David said, thoughtfully; "I—stop! The two side-shutters in the bay window are closed, and

there is the same vivid crimson blind in the centre window. And the self color of the walls is exactly the same. The faint discoloration by the fireplace is a perfect facsimile."

"In fact, this is the room you were in the other night," Bell said quietly.

"Impossible!" Steel cried. "The blind may be an accident, so might the fading of the distemper. But the furniture, the engravings, the number over the door."

"Exactly what I was coming to. I noticed an old pair of steps in the back sitting-room. Would you mind placing them against the fanlight for me?"

David complied readily. Over his head were the figures 218 in elongated shape and formed in white porcelain.

"Now then," Bell said, slowly. "Take this pocket-knife, apply the blade to the right-hand lower half of the bottom of the 8—to half the small o, in fact—and I shall be extremely surprised if the quarter section doesn't come away from the glass of the fanlight, leaving the rest of the figure intact."

The point of the knife was hardly under the edge of the porcelain before the segment of the lower circle dropped into Steel's hand.

"Go out into the road and look at the fanlight," Bell directed.

David complied eagerly. A sharp cry of surprise escaped him. Instead of the figures 218 he could read now the change to 219—a fairly indifferent 9, but one that would have passed muster.

"For the present, the way in which the furniture trick was worked must remain a mystery. But there has been furniture here, or this room and the hall would not have been so carefully swept whilst the rest of the house remains in so dirty a condition. If my eyes don't deceive me I can see two fresh nails driven into the archway leading to the back hall. On those nails hung the curtain that prevented you seeing more than was necessary. Are you still incredulous as to the house where you had your remarkable adventure?"

"I confess that my faith has been seriously shaken," David admitted. "But when I came here the other night—provided of course that I did come here—immediately upon entering the dining-room the place was brilliantly illuminated. Now, directly the place was void the supply of electric current would be cut off at the meter. So far as I can judge, some two or three units must have been consumed during my visit. Those units must show on the meter."

"Let us go down into the basement and settle the matter. There is pretty sure to be a card on the meter made up to the day when the last tenant went out. See, the supply is cut off now."

As Steel spoke he snapped down the hall switch and no result came. Down in the basement by the area door stood the meter. Both switches were turned off, but on Bell pressing them down Steel was enabled to light the passage.

"There's the card," Bell exclaimed. "Made up to 25th June, 1895, since when the house has been void. Just a minute whilst I read the meter. Yes, that's right. According to this card in your hand, provided that the light has not been used since the index was taken, should read at 1521. What do you make of the card?"

"1532," David cried. "Which means eleven units since the meter was last taken. Or, if you like to put it from that point of view, eleven units used the night that I came here. You are quite right, Bell. You have practically convinced me that I have been inside the real 219 for the first time today."

"What do you propose to do next?"

"Find out the name of the last tenant or owner," Bell suggested.

"Discover what the two houses were used for when they were occu-

pled by one person. Also ascertain why on earth the owners are willing to let a house this size and in this situation for a sum of £80 per annum. Let us go and take the keys back to the agents."

The more Steel thought of it the more muddled and bewildered did he become. No complicated tangle in the way of a plot had ever been anything like the skein this was.

"I'm like a child in your hands," he said. "I'm a blind man on the end of a string. And if ever I help a woman again—"

He paused as he caught sight of Ruth Gates's lovely face through the window of No. 219. Her features were tinged with melancholy; there was a look of deepest sympathy and feeling and compassion in her glorious eyes. She slipped back as Steel bowed, and the rest of his speech was lost in a sigh.

CHAPTER IX.

A bell tolled mournfully. On winter nights folks, passing the House of the Silent Sorrow, compared the doleful clanging to the boom that carries the criminal from the cell to the scaffold. Every night all the year round the little valley of Longdean echoed to that mournful clang. Perhaps it was for this reason that a wandering poet christened the place as the House of the Silent Sorrow.

For seven years this had been going on. From half-past seven till eight o'clock that hideous bell rang its swinging, melancholy note. Why it was nobody could possibly tell. Nobody in the village had even been beyond the great rusty gates leading to a dark drive of Scotch firs, though one small boy bolder than the rest had once climbed the lichen-strewn stone wall and penetrated the thick undergrowth beyond. Hence he had returned, with white face and staring eyes, with the information that great wild dogs dwelt in the thickets.

Nobody knew anything about the people at Longdean Grange. The place had been shut up for thirty years, being understood to be in Chancery when the announcement went forth that a distant relative of the family had arranged to live there in future.

What the lady of the Grange was like nobody could say. She had arrived late one night accompanied by a niece, and from that moment she had never been beyond the house.

Everything was ordered by telephone from Brighton, and left at the porter's lodge. The porter was a stranger, also he was deaf and exceedingly ill-tempered.

And yet, but for the mighty clamour of that hideous bell and that belt of wildness that surrounded it, Longdean Grange was a cheerful-looking house enough. Any visitor emerging from the drive would have been delighted with it. For the lawns were trim and truly kept, the beds were blazing masses of flowers, the creepers over the Grange

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were not allowed to riot too extravagantly.

The bell was swinging dolefully over the stable-turret; it rang out its passing note till the clock struck eight and then mercifully ceased. At the same moment precisely as she had done any time the last seven years the lady of the house descended the broad black oak staircase to the hall. A butler of the old-fashioned type bowed to her and announced that dinner was ready. He might have been the butler or an archbishop from his mien and deportment, yet his evening dress was seedy and shiny to the last degree, his patent leather boots had long lost their lustre, his linen was terribly frayed and yellow. Two footmen in livery stood in the hall. They might have been supers playing on the boards of a travelling theatre, their once smartly cut and trimmed coats hung raggedly upon them.

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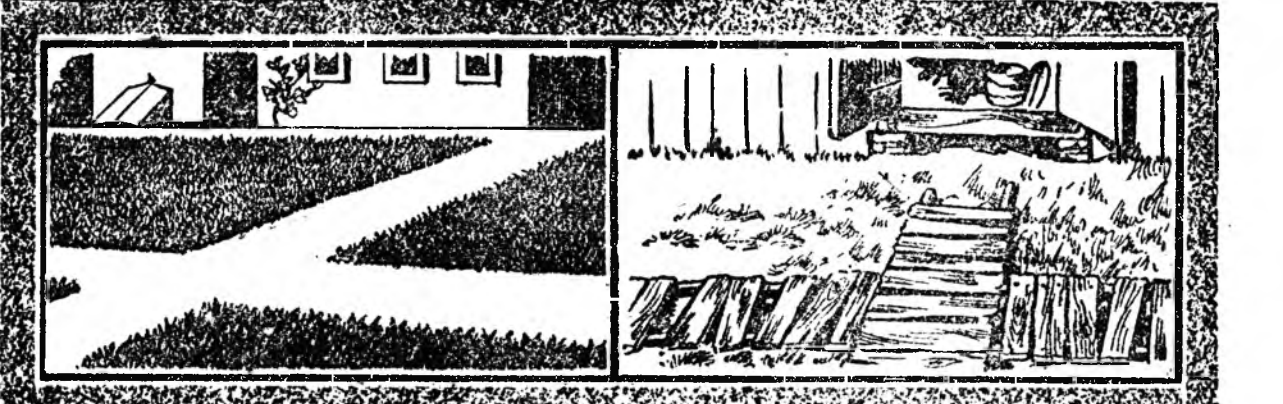
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"Do you believe in hypnotism?" he asked, as he looked intently into her great brown eyes.

"I must," she answered, with all the bravery she could summon. "I know that you are going to kiss me, but I am powerless to protest."



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