

Prince Rupert's Ring;

OR, THE HOUSE OF THE
SILENT SORROW.

CHAPTER IX.—(Cont'd.)

There were two other people standing by the table, one a girl with a handsome, intellectual face full of passion but ill repressed; the other a big fair man known to the village as "Mr. Charles." As a matter of fact, his name was Reginald Henson, and he was distantly related to Mrs. Henson, the strange chatelaine of the House of the Silent Sorrow. He was smiling blandly now at Enid Henson, the wonderfully beautiful girl with the defiant shining eyes.

"We may be seated now that madam has arrived," Henson said.

He spoke with a certain mocking humility and a queer wry smile on his broad, loose mouth that filled Enid with a speechless fury. The girl was hot-blooded—a good hater and a good friend. And the master passion of her life was hatred of Reginald Henson.

"Madam has had a refreshing rest?" Henson suggested. "Pardon our anxious curiosity."

Again Enid raged, but Margaret Henson might have been of stone for all the notice she took.

The meal proceeded in silence save for an oily sarcasm from Henson. In the dense stillness the occasional howl of a dog could be heard. A slight flush of annoyance crossed Henson's broad face.

"Some day I shall poison all those hounds," he said.

Enid looked up at him swiftly.

"If all the hounds round Long-dean were poisoned or shot it would be a good place to live in," she said.

Henson smiled caressingly, like Petruccio might have done in his milder moments.

"My dear Enid you misjudge me," he said. "But I shall get justice some day."

Enid replied that she fervently hoped so.

The meal came to an end at length and Mrs. Henson rose suddenly. She bowed as if to some imaginary personage and moved with dignity towards the door. Reginald Henson stood aside and opened it for her, the younger woman following.

Henson's face changed instantly, as if a mask had fallen from his smug features. He became alert and vigorous. The blue eyes were cold and cruel, there was a hungry look about the loose mouth.

"Take a bottle of claret and the cigars into the small library, Williams," he said. "And open the window, the dust stifles me."

The dignified butler bowed respectfully, but his thoughts were by no means pleasant as he hastened to obey. Enid was loitering in the hall as Williams passed with the tray.

"Small study and the window open, miss," he whispered. "There's some game on. And him so anxious to know how Miss Christina is. Says she ought to call him in professionally."

"All right, Williams," Enid replied. "My sister is worse to-night. And unless she gets better I shall insist upon her seeing a doctor. And I am obliged for the hint about Mr. Henson. The little study commands the staircase leading to my sister's bedroom."

"And the open window commands the garden," Williams said.

"Yes, yes. Now go. You are a real friend, Williams, and I will never forget your goodness. Run along—I can actually feel that man coming."

As a matter of fact, Henson was approaching noiselessly. Despite his great bulk he had the clean, dainty step of a cat. Henson was always listening. He liked to find other people out, though as yet he had not been found out himself. He stood before the world as a social missionary; he made speeches at religious gatherings and affected the women to tears. He was known to devote a considerable fortune to doing good; he had been asked to stand for Parliament, where his real ambition lay. Gilead Gates had alluded to Reginald Henson as his right-hand man.

He crept along to the study,

where the lamps were lighted and the silver claret-jug set out. He carefully dusted a big arm-chair and began to smoke, having first carefully extinguished the lamps and seen that the window leading to the garden was wide open. Henson was watching for something. In his feline nature he had the full gift of feline patience. To serve his own ends he would have sat there watching all night if necessary. He heard an occasional whimper, a howl from one of the dogs; he heard Enid's voice singing in the drawing-room.

In the midst of the drawing-room Margaret Henson sat still as a statue. The distant, weary expression never left her eyes for a moment. As the stable clock, the only one going on the premises, struck ten, Enid crossed over from the piano to her aunt's side.

"Aunt," she whispered; "dear, I have had a message!"

"Message of woe and desolation," Margaret Henson cried. "Tribulation and sorrow on this wretched house. For seven long years the hand of the Lord has lain heavily upon us."

Enid's eyes flashed.

"That scoundrel has been robbing you again," she said.

"Two thousand pounds," came the mechanical reply, "to pad a bed in some hospital. And there is no escape, no hope unless we drag the shameful secret from him. Bit by bit and drop by drop, and then I shall die and you and Christina will be penniless."

"I daresay Chris and myself will survive that," Enid said, cheerfully. "But we have a plan, dear aunt; we have thought it out carefully. Reginald Henson has hidden the secret somewhere and we are going to find it."

Margaret Henson nodded and mumbled. Enid turned away almost despairingly. At the same time the stable clock struck the half-hour after ten. Williams slipped in with a tray of glasses, noiselessly. On the tray lay a small pile of tradesmen's books. The top one was of dull red with no lettering upon it at all.

"The housekeeper's respectful compliments, miss, and would you go through them to-morrow?" Williams said. He tapped the top book significantly. "Tomorrow is the last day of the month."

Enid picked up the book with strange eagerness. There were pages of figures and cabalistic entries that no ordinary person could make anything of. Pages here and there were signed and decorated with pink receipt stamps. Enid glanced down the last column, and her face grew a little paler.

"Aunt," she whispered, "I've got to go out. At once; do you understand? There is a message here, and I am afraid that something dreadful has happened. Can you sing?"

"Ah, yes; a song of lamentation—a dirge for the dead."

"No, no, seven years ago you had a lovely voice. I recollect what a pleasure it was to me as a child. Aunt, I must go out; and that man must know nothing about it. He is by the window in the small library now, watching—watching. Help me, for the love of Heaven, help me."

The girl spoke with a fervency and passion that seemed to awaken a responsive chord in Margaret Henson's breast.

"You are a dear girl," she said, dreamily; "yes, a dear girl. And I loved singing; it was a great grief to me that they would not let me go upon the stage. But I haven't sung since—since that—"

She pointed to the huddled heap of china and glass and dried, dusty flowers in one corner.

"But you must try," she whispered. "It is for the good of the family, for the recovery of the secret. Reginald Henson is sly and cruel and clever. But we have one on our side now who is far more clever. And, unless I can get away to-night without that man knowing, the chance may be lost for ever. Come!"

Margaret commenced to sing in a soft minor.

"You are to sing till I return. You are to leave Henson to imagine that I am singing. He will never

guess. Now then," whispered Enid.

Enid crept away into the hall, closing the door softly behind her. She made her way noiselessly from the house and across the lawn. As Henson slipped through the open window into the garden Enid darted behind a bush. She could see the red glow of the cigar between his lips.

He was pacing down the garden in the direction of the drive. The cigar seemed to dance like a mocking sprite into the bushes. Usually the man avoided those bushes. If Reginald Henson was afraid of one thing it was of the dogs. And in return they hated him as he hated them.

Enid's mind was made up. If the sound of that distant voice should only cease for a moment she was quite sure Henson would turn back. But he could hear it, and she knew that she was safe. Enid slipped past him into the bushes and gave a faint click of her lips. Something moved and whined, and two dark objects bounded towards her. She caught them together by their collars. Then she led the way back so as to get on Henson's tracks. He was walking on ahead of her now.

"Hold him, Dan," she whispered.

"Watch, Prance; watch boy."

There was a low growl as the hounds found the scent and dashed forward. Henson came up all standing and sweating in every pore. It was not the first time he had been held up by the dogs, and he knew by hard experience what to expect if he made a bolt for it.

Two grim muzzles were pressed against his trembling knees; he saw four rows of ivory flashing in the dim light. Then the dogs crouched at his feet, watching him with eyes of red and lurid as the point of his own cigar. Had he attempted to move, had he tried coercion, they would have fallen upon him and torn him in pieces.

"Confusion to the creatures!" he cried, passionately. "And here I'll have to stay till Williams locks up the stables. Wouldn't that little Jezebel laugh at me if she could see me now? She would enjoy it better than singing songs in the drawing-room to our sainted Margaret. Steady, you brutes! I didn't move."

He stood there rigidly, almost afraid to take the cigar from his lips whilst Enid sped without further need for caution down the drive. The lodgegates were closed and the deaf porter's house in darkness, so that Enid could unlock the wicket without fear of detection. She rattled the key on the bars and a figure slipped out of the darkness.

"Good heavens, Ruth, is it really you?" Enid cried.

"Really me, Enid. I came over on my bicycle. I am supposed to be round at some friend's house in Brunswick Square, and one of the servants is sitting up for me. Is Reginald safe? He hasn't yet discovered the secret of the tradesmen's book?"

"That's all right, dear. But why are you here?"

"Well, I will try to tell you so in as few words as possible. I never felt ashamed of anything in my life. We have got Mr. David Steel into frightful trouble. He is going to be charged with attempted murder and robbery."

"Ruth!"

"It was the night when—well, you know the night. It was after Mr. Steel returned home from his visit to 219 Brunswick Square—"

"You mean 218, Ruth."

"It doesn't matter, because he knows pretty well all about it by this time. It would have been far wiser to have taken Mr. Steel entirely into our confidence. Oh, oh, Enid, if we had only left out that little sentiment over the cigar-case!"

"Dearest girl, tell me what you mean. Quick!"

"I can't quite make out how it happened, but that same case that

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we—that Mr. Steel has—has been positively identified as one purchased from Waleen by the injured man. There is no question about it. And they have found out about Mr. Steel being short of money, and the £1,000, and everything."

"But we know that that cigar-case from Lockhart's in North Street was positively—"

"Yes yes. But what has become of that? And in what strange way was the change made? I tell you that the whole thing frightens me. We thought that we had hit upon a scheme to solve the problem, and keep our friends out of danger. There was the American at Genoa who volunteered to assist us. A week later he was found dead in his bed. Then there was Christina's friend, who disappeared entirely. And now we try further assistance in the case of Mr. Steel, and he stands face to face with a terrible charge. And he has found us out."

Ruth explained how Steel had called Bell to his aid.

"And Bell is coming here to-night," she said.

"Here!" Enid cried. "To see Aunt Margaret? Then he found out about you. At all hazards Mr. Bell must not come here—he must not. I would rather let everything go than that. I would rather see auntie dead and Reginald Henson master here. You must—"

In the distance came the rattle of harness bells and the trot of a horse.

"I'm afraid it's too late," Ruth Gates said, sadly.

CHAPTER X.

"Before we go any farther," Bell said, after a long pause. "I should like to search the house from top to bottom."

"I am entirely in your hands," David said.

"When we have found the woman we shall have to find the man who is at the bottom of the plot. I mean the man who is not only thwarting the woman, but giving you a pretty severe lesson as to the advisability of minding your own business."

"Then you don't think I am being made the victim of a vile conspiracy?"

"Not by the woman, certainly. You are the victim of some fiendish counterplot by the man. By placing you in dire peril he compels the woman to speak to save you, and thus to expose her hand."

"Then in that case I propose to sit tight," David said, grimly. "I am bound to be prosecuted for robbery and attempted murder in due course. If my man dies I am in a tight place."

"And if he recovers your antagonist may be in a tighter," Bell chuckled.

"If we are going to make a search of the premises, the sooner we start the better," said Steel.

Upstairs there was nothing beyond certain lumber. Down in the housekeeper's room was a large collection of dusty furniture, and a number of pictures and engravings. Bell began idly to turn the latter over.

"I am a maniac on the subject of old prints," he explained. "I never see a pile without a wild longing to examine them. And, by jove, there are some good things here. Unless I am greatly mistaken—here, Steel, pull up the blinds! Good heavens, is it possible?"

"The Rembrandt," he gasped. "Look at it, man! The Crimson Blind!"

"No getting away from the crimson blind," David murmured. "By jove, Bell, it is a magnificent piece of work. I've a special fancy for Rembrandt engravings, but I never saw one equal to that."

"And you never will," Bell replied, "save in one instance. The picture itself was painted in Rembrandt's modest lodging in the Keizerskroon Tavern after the forced sale of his paintings at that hostel in the year 1658. At that time Rembrandt was painfully poor, as his recorded tavern bills show. The same bills also disclose the fact that 'The Crimson Blind' was painted for a private customer with a condition that the subject should be engraved as well. After one impression had been taken off the plate the picture was destroyed by a careless servant. In a sudden fit of rage Rembrandt destroyed the plate, having, they say, only taken one impression from it."

"Then there is only one of these engravings in the world? What a find!"

"There is one other, as I know to my cost," Bell said, significantly. "Until a few days ago I never entertained the idea that there were two. Steel, you are the victim of a vile conspiracy but it is nothing to the conspiracy which has darkened my life."

"Sooner or later I always felt that I should get to the bottom of the mystery, and now I am certain of it. And, strange as it may seem, I verily believe that you and I are hunting the same man down—that the one man is at the bottom of the two evils. But you shall hear my story presently. What we have to find out now is who was the last tenant and who is the present owner of the house, and incidentally learn who this lumber belongs to. Ah, this has been a great day for me!"

(To be continued.)

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