

Prince Rupert's Ring;

OR, THE HOUSE OF THE
SILENT SORROW.

CHAPTER X.—(Cont'd)

Bell spoke exultantly, a great light shining in his eyes. And David sapiently asked no further questions for the present. All that he wanted to know would come in time. The next move, of course, was to visit the agent of the property.

A smart, dapper little man, looking absurdly out of place in an exceedingly spacious office, was quite ready to give every information. It was certainly true that 218 Brunswick Square, was to be let at an exceedingly low rent on a repairing lease, and that the owner had a lot more property in Brighton to be let on the same terms. The lady was exceedingly rich and eccentric; indeed, by asking such low rents she was doing her best to seriously diminish her income.

"Do you know the lady at all?" Bell asked.

"Not personally," the agent admitted. "So far as I can tell, the property came into the present owner's hands some years ago by inheritance. The property also included a very old house, called Longdean Grange, not far from Rottingdean, where the lady, Mrs. Henson, lives at present. Nobody ever goes there, nobody ever visits there, and to keep the place free from prying visitors a large number of savage dogs are allowed to prowling about the grounds."

Bell listened eagerly. Watching him David could see that his eyes glistened like points of steel. There was something subtle behind all this commonplace that touched the imagination of the novelist.

"Has 218 been let during the occupation of the present owner?" Bell asked.

"No," the agent replied. "But the present owner was interested in both 218 and 219, which used to be a kind of high-class convalescent home for poor clergy and the widows and daughters of poor clergy in want of a holiday. The one house for the men and the other for the women, and both were furnished exactly alike; in fact, Mr. Gate's landlord, the tenant of 219, bought the furniture exactly as it stands when the scheme fell through."

Steel looked up swiftly. A sudden inspiration came to him.

"In that case what became of the precisely similar furniture in 218?" he asked.

"That I cannot tell you," the agent said. "That house was let as it stood to some sham philanthropist whose name I forget. The whole thing was a fraud, and the swindler only avoided arrest by leaving the country. Probably the goods were stored somewhere or perhaps seized by some creditor. But I really can't say definitely without looking the matter up. There are some books and prints now left in the house out of the wreck. We shall probably put them in a sale, only they have been overlooked. The whole lot will not fetch £5."

"Would you take £5 for them?" Bell asked.

"Gladly. Even if only to get them carted away."

Bell gravely produced a £5 note, for which he asked and received a receipt. Then he and Steel repaired to 218 once more, whence they recovered the Rembrandt and subsequently returned the keys of the house to the agent.

"And now, perhaps, you will be good enough to explain," David suggested.

"My dear fellow, it would take too long," Bell cried. "Dine with me at half past seven and I will tell you all."

"At my house," said Steel.

"Agreed," cried Bell. Steel lighted a cigarette and strolled thoughtfully homewards along the front. The more he thought over the mystery the more tangled it became. Then he found himself thinking about Ruth Gate's gentle face and lovely eyes, until he looked up and saw the girl before him.

"You—you wanted to speak to me?" he stammered.

"I followed you on purpose," the

girl said, quietly. "I can't tell you everything, because it is not my secret to tell. But believe me everything will come out right in the end. Don't think badly of me, don't be hard and bitter because—"

"Because I am nothing of the kind," David smiled. "It is impossible to look into a face like yours and doubt you. And I am certain that you are acting loyally and faithfully for the sake of others who—"

"Yes, yes, and for your sake, too. Oh, if you only knew how I admire and esteem you! If only—"

She paused with the deep blush crimsoning her face. David caught her hand, and it seemed to him for a moment that she returned the pressure.

"Let me help you," he whispered. "Only be my friend and I will forgive everything."

She gave him a long look of her deep, velvety eyes, she flashed him a little smile, and was gone.

CHAPTER XI.

Hatherley Bell turned up at Downend Terrace gay and debonair as if he had not a single trouble in the world.

After the dinner they went to the library. Bell lighted a cigar and plunged into the story:

"About seven years ago professional business took me to Amsterdam; a brilliant young medical genius who was drinking himself prematurely into his grave had made some wonderful discoveries relating to the brain and psychology generally, so I decided to learn what I could before it was too late.

"Well, in Amsterdam I got to know everybody who was worth knowing—medical, artistic, social. And amongst the rest was an Englishman called Lord Littimer, his son, and an exceedingly clever nephew of his, Henson by name, who was the son's tutor. Littimer was a savant, a scholar, and a fine connoisseur as regarded pictures. He was popularly supposed to have the finest collection of old prints in England. He would travel anywhere in search of something fresh, and the rumor of some apocryphal treasure in Amsterdam had brought him thither. He and I were friends from the first, as, indeed, were the son and myself. Henson, the nephew, was more quiet and reserved, but fond, as I discovered, of a little secret dissipation.

"In those days I was not averse to a little life myself. I was passionately fond of all games of cards, and I am afraid that I was in the habit of gambling to a greater extent than I could afford. I don't gamble now and I don't play cards; in fact, I shall never touch a card again as long as I live. Why, you shall hear all in good time.

"We were getting on very well together at that time when Lord Littimer's sister paid us a visit. She came accompanied by a daughter called Enid. I will not describe her, because no words of mine could do her justice. In a word, I fell over head and ears in love with Enid, and in that state I have remained ever since. Of all the crosses that I have to bear the knowledge that I love Enid and that she loves—and despises—me, is by far the heaviest.

"We were a very happy party there until Van Sneek and Von Gulden turned up. Enid and I had come to an understanding, and, though we kept our secret, we were not going to do so for long. From the very first Von Gulden admired her. He was a handsome, swaggering soldier, a good-looking, wealthy man, who had a great reputation for gallantry, and something worse.

"It is no fault of mine that I am extremely sensitive as to my personal appearance, but Von Gulden played upon it until he drove me nearly mad. He challenged me sneeringly to certain sports wherein he knew I could not shine; he challenged me to cards, where I fancied I was his master."

"Was I? Well, we had been dining that night, and perhaps too freely, for I entirely lost my head before I began the game in earnest. Those covert sneers had nearly driven me mad. To make a long story short, when I got up from the

table that night, I owed my opponent £800, without the faintest prospect of paying a tenth part of it. And if that money were not forthcoming in the next few days I was utterly ruined.

"The following morning the great discovery was made. The Van Sneek I have alluded to was an artist, a dealer, a man of the shadiest reputation, whom my patron, Lord Littimer, had picked up. It was Van Sneek who produced the copy of 'The Crimson Blind.' Not only did he produce the copy, but he produced the history from some recently discovered papers relating to the Keizerskroon Tavern of the year 1656, which would have satisfied a more exacting man than Littimer. In the end the Viscount purchased the engraving for £800 English."

"You can imagine how delighted he was with his prize—he had secured an engraving by Rembrandt that was absolutely unique. Under more favorable circumstances I should have shared that pleasure. But I was face to face with ruin, and therefore I had but small heart for rejoicing.

"I came down the next morning after a sleepless night, and with a wild endeavor to scheme some way of getting the money to pay my creditor. To my absolute amazement I found a polite note from the lieutenant coldly thanking me for the notes I had sent him by messenger, and handing me a formal receipt for £800. At first I regarded it as a hoax. But, with all his queer ways, Von Gulden was a gentleman. Somebody had paid the debt for me. And somebody had, though I have never found out who to this day."

"All the same, you have your suspicions?" Steel suggested.

"I have a very strong suspicion, but I have never been able to verify it. All the same, you can imagine what an enormous weight it was off my mind, and how comparatively cheerful I was as I crossed over to the hotel of Lord Littimer after breakfast. I found him literally beside himself with passion. Some thief had gone into his room in the night and stolen his Rembrandt. The frame was intact, but the engraving had been rolled up and taken away.

"I was sent off on foot to look for Van Sneek, only to find that he had suddenly left the city. He had got into trouble with the police, and had fled to avoid being sent to goal. And from that day to this nothing has been seen of that picture."

"But I read to-day that it is still in Littimer Castle," said David.

"Another one," Bell observed. "Oblige me by opening yonder parcel. There you see is the print that I purchased to-day for £5. This, this, my friend, is the print that was stolen from Littimer's lodgings in Amsterdam. If you will closely look at it you will see four dull red spots in the left-hand corner. They are supposed to be blood-spots from a cut finger of the artist. I am pre-

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pared to swear that this is the very print, frame and all, that was purchased in Amsterdam from that shady scoundrel Van Sneek."

"But Littimer is credited with having one in his collection," David urged.

"He has one in his collection," Bell said coolly. "And, moreover, he is firmly under the impression that he is at present happy in the possession of his own lost treasure. And to this very day I was under exactly the same delusion. Now I know that there must have been two copies of the plate, and this knowledge was used to ruin me."

"But," Steel murmured, "I don't exactly see—"

"I am just coming to that. We hunted high and low for the picture, but nowhere could it be found. The affair created a profound impression in Amsterdam. A day or two later Von Gulden went back to his duty on the Belgian frontier and business called me home. I packed my solitary portmanteau and departed. When I arrived at the frontier I opened my luggage for the custom officer and the whole contents were turned out without ceremony. On the bottom was a roll of paper on a stick that I quite failed to recognize. An inquisitive Customs House officer opened it and immediately called the lieutenant in charge. Strange to say, he proved to be Von Gulden. He came up to me, very gravely, with the paper in his hand.

"May I inquire how this came amongst your luggage?" he asked.

"I could say nothing, for there lay the Rembrandt. The red spots had been smudged out of the corner, but there the picture was.

"Well, I lost my head then. I accused Von Gulden of all kinds of disgraceful things. And he behaved like a gentleman—he made me ashamed of myself. But he kept the picture and returned it to Littimer, and I was ruined. Lord Littimer declined to prosecute, but he would not see me and he would hear of no explanation. Indeed, I had none to offer. Enid refused to see me also or reply to my letters. The story of my big gambling debt, and

its liquidation, got about. Steel, I was ruined. Some enemy had done this thing, and from that day to this I have been a marked man."

"But how on earth was it done?" Steel cried.

"For the present I can only make surmises," Bell replied. "Van Sneek was a slippery dog. Of course, he had two of those plates. He kept the one back so as to sell the other at a fancy price. My enemy discovered this, and Van Sneek's sudden flight was his opportunity. He could afford to get rid of me at an apparently dear rate. He stole Littimer's engraving—in fact, he must have done so, or I should not have it at this moment. Then he smudged out some imaginary spots on the other and hid it in my luggage, knowing that it would be found. Also he knew that it would be returned to Littimer, and that the stolen plate could be laid aside and produced at some remote date as an original find. The find has been mine, and it will go hard if I can't get to the bottom of the mystery now. It is strange that your mysterious trouble and mine should be bound up so closely together, but in the end it will simplify matters, for the very reason that we are both on the hunt for the same man.

"We will bait for him as one does for a wily old trout. The fly shall be the Rembrandt, and you see he will rise to it in time. But beyond this I have made one or two important discoveries to-day. We are going to the house of the strange lady who owns 218 and 219 Brunswick Square, and I shall be greatly mistaken if she does not prove to be an old acquaintance of mine. There will be danger.

"Come, let us go at once to Longdean Grange."

Bell rose and lighted a fresh cigar.

(To be continued.)

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