

Prince Rupert's Ring;

OR, THE HOUSE OF THE SILENT SORROW.

CHAPTER XIII.

David Steel followed his guide with the feelings of the man who has given himself over to circumstances.

"When I had the pleasure of seeing you before—" David began.

"Pardon me, you have never had the pleasure of seeing me before."

"I bow to your correction and admit that I have never seen you before. But your voice reminds me of a voice I heard very recently under remarkable circumstances. It was my good fortune to help a lady in distress a little time back. If she had told me more I might have aided her still further. As it is, here reticence has landed me into serious trouble."

Enid grasped the speaker's arm convulsively.

"I am deeply sorry to hear it," she whispered. "Perhaps the lady in question was reticent for your sake. Perhaps she had confided more thoroughly in good men before. And suppose those good men had disappeared?"

"In other words, that they had been murdered. Who by?"

There was a snarl from one of the hounds hard by, and a deep, angry curse from Henson. Enid pointed solemnly in his direction. No words of hers would have been so thrilling and eloquent. David strode along without further questions on that head.

"But there is one thing that you must tell me," he said, as they stood together in the porch. "Is the first part of my advice going to be carried out?"

"Yes. That is why you are here now."

She handed him pencil and paper. "Now will you please write what I suggest? Write. See nothing and notice nothing, I implore you. Only agree with everything that Dr. Walker says, and leave the room as quickly as possible! Now sign your name. We can go into the drawing-room and wait till Dr. Bell comes down. You are merely a friend of his. I will see that he has this paper at once."

Enid led him into the drawing-room.

Meanwhile, with no suspicion of the path he was treading, Bell had gone upstairs. He came at length to the door of the room where the sick girl lay. Bell caught a glimpse of a white figure lying motionless in bed. As he would have entered Margaret Henson came out and closed the door.

"You are not going in there," she said. "No, no. Everything of mine you touch you blight and wither. If the girl is to die, let her die in peace."

Bell approached the figure in the doorway and whispered a few words rapidly in her ear. The effect was electrical. The figure seemed to wilt and shrivel up, all the power and resistance had gone. She stepped aside, moaning and wringing her hands.

Bell entered the sick room. Then he raised his head and sniffed the heavy atmosphere as an eager hound might have done. A quick, sharp question rose to his lips, only to be instantly suppressed as he noted the vacant glance of his colleague.

"Albumen," Bell muttered.

"What fiend's game is this?"

He paused and touched the girl's brow with his fingers. At the same moment Enid came into the room.

"Well," she whispered, "is she better, better, or—Hatherley read this."

One look and Bell mastered the contents.

"It is your sister who lies there," Bell whispered, meaningly.

Enid nodded and Bell crossed over to Walker.

"You are perfectly correct," he said. "The patient cannot possibly last till the morning."

Walker smiled feebly.

"It is a melancholy satisfaction to have my opinion confirmed," he said. "Miss Henson, if you will get Williams to see me as far as the lodge-gates . . . it is so late that—"

Williams came at length, and the Nettle doctor departed.

"What does it mean?" Bell asked hoarsely. "What fiend's plaything

are you meddling with? It was only for your sake that I didn't speak my mind before the fool who has just gone. He has seen murder done under his eyes for days, and he is ready to give a certificate of the cause of death."

"Chris is not going to die," Enid whispered.

"Then leave her alone. No more drugs; no medicines even. Give nature a chance. Thank Heaven, the girl has a perfect constitution."

"Chris is not going to die," Enid repeated doggedly, "but the certificate will be given, all the same. Oh, Hatherley, you must trust me."

They were down in the drawing-room again; David waiting, with a strange sense of embarrassment under Margaret Henson's distant eyes. She turned eagerly to Bell.

"Tell me all there is to know," she cried.

"Your niece's sufferings are over," Bell said.

A profound silence followed, broken presently by angry voices outside. Then Williams looked in at the door and beckoned Enid to him. His face was wreathed in an uneasy grin.

"Mr. Henson has got away," he said. "Blest if I can say how. And the dogs have rolled him about, and tore his clothes, and made such a picture of him as you never saw."

"Well, he came back in through the study window, swearing dreadful. And he went right up to his room, after ordering whisky and soda-water."

Enid flew back to the drawing-room. Not a moment was to be lost. At any hazard Reginald Henson must be kept in ignorance of the presence of strangers. A minute later, and the darkness of the night had swallowed them up.

"A strange night's work," David said, presently.

"Aye, but pregnant with result," Bell answered. "But why did you send me that note just now?"

"It is part of the scheme," Steel said.

CHAPTER XIV.

With a sigh of unutterable relief Enid heard Williams returning. Reginald Henson had not come down yet, and the rest of the servants had retired some time. Williams came up with a request as to whether he could do anything more for her.

"Just one thing," said Enid. "The good dogs have done their work well to-night, but they have not quite finished. Find Rollo for me, and bring him here quick. Then you can shut up the house, and I will see that Mr. Henson is made comfortable after his fright."

The big dog came presently and followed Enid upstairs to the room where the sick girl lay.

There was nobody in the room. The patient's bed was empty!

"It works well," Enid murmured. "Lie down, Rollo; lie there, good dog. And if anybody comes in tear him to pieces."

The great brute crouched down obediently. Enid crept down stairs. She had hardly reached the hall before Henson followed her. His big face was white with passion.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"I might ask you the same question," she said. "You look white and shaken. But please don't make a noise. It is not fitting now. Chris—" Enid hesitated.

"Chris has gone. She passed away an hour ago."

Henson muttered something that sounded like consolation.

"I am going to bed," Enid said, wearily. "Good-night."

She went noiselessly upstairs, and Henson passed into the library. He was puzzled over this sudden end of Christiana Henson. He was half inclined to believe that she was not dead at all. Well, he could easily ascertain that for himself. There would be time enough in the morning.

For a long time Henson sat there thinking and smoking. Like other great men, he had his worries and

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troubles, and that they were mainly of his own making did not render them any lighter. So long as Margaret Henson was under the pressure of his thumb, money was no great object. But there were other situations where money was utterly powerless. He wondered—what was that?

Somebody creeping about the house, somebody talking in soft, though distinct, whispers. He slipped into the hall; Margaret Henson was there.

"How you startled me!" Henson said. "Why don't you go to bed?"

Enid, looking over the balustrade from the landing, wondered so also, but she kept herself prudently hidden.

"I cannot," the feeble, moaning voice said. "The house is full of ghosts; they haunt and follow me everywhere. And Chris is dead, and I have seen her spirit."

"So I'm told," Henson said, with brutal callousness. "What was the ghost like?"

"Like Chris. And just when I was going to speak to her she turned and disappeared into Enid's bedroom."

"So Christiana's ghost passed into her sister's bedroom. You come and sit quietly in the library whilst I investigate."

Margaret Henson complied in her dull, mechanical way; and Enid flew like a flash of light to her room. Another girl was there—a girl exceedingly like her, but looking wonderfully pale and drawn.

"That fiend suspects," Enid said.

"How unfortunate it was that you should meet aunt like that. Chris, you must go back again. Fly to your own room and compose yourself. Only let him see you lying white and still there, and he must be satisfied."

Chris rose with a shudder.

"And if the wretch offers to touch me," she moaned. "If he does—"

"If he does, Rollo will kill him to a certainty."

She flew along the corridor and gained her room in safety. It was an instant's work to throw off her cloak and compose herself rigidly under the single white sheet. Then the door was opened and Henson came in. He could see the outline of the white figure, and a sigh of satisfaction escaped him.

He stretched out his hand to touch the marble forehead, there was a snarl and a gurgle, and Henson came to the ground with a hideous crash that carried him staggering beyond the door into the corridor. Rollo had the intruder by the throat.

When he came to himself he was lying on his bed, with Williams and Enid bending over him.

"How did it happen?" Enid asked.

"—I was walking along the corridor," Henson gasped, "going—going to bed, you see; and one of those diabolical dogs must have got into the house. Before I knew what I was doing the creature flew at my throat and dragged me to the floor. Telephone for Walker

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at once. I am dying, Williams."

He fell back once more utterly lost to his surroundings. There was a great, gaping, raw wound at the side of the throat that caused Enid to shudder.

"Do you think he is—dead, Williams?" she asked.

"No such luck as that," Williams said, with the air of a confirmed pessimist.

* * * * *

The first grey streaks of dawn were in the air as Enid stood outside the lodge-gates. A neat figure in grey, marvellously like her, was by her side. The figure in grey was dressed for travelling and she carried a bag in her hand.

"Good-bye, dear, and good luck to you," she said.

"You have absolutely everything that you require?" Enid asked.

"Everything. By the time you are at breakfast I shall be in London. And once I am there the search for the secret will begin in earnest."

"You are sure that Reginald Henson suspected nothing?"

"I am perfectly certain that he was satisfied. Still, if it had not been for the dogs! Au revoir!"

CHAPTER XV.

Steel lay sleepily back in the cab. They were well into the main road again before Bell spoke.

"It is pretty evident that you and I are on the same track," he said.

"I am certain that I am on the right one," David replied.

"I found the lady who interviewed me in the darkness, which is more to the point."

"As a matter of fact, you did nothing of the kind," laughed Bell.

"Then whose voice was it that was so very much like Miss Enid's?"

"The lady's sister. Enid Henson was not at 218 Brunswick Square, on the night in question. Of that you may be certain. But it's a queer business altogether. Of this you may be sure. We have found a foe worthy our steel."

"We? Do you mean to say that your enemy and mine is a common one?"

"Certainly. When I found my

foe I found yours."

"And who may he be?"

"Reginald Henson. Mind you, I had no idea of it when I went to Longdean Grange to-night. I went there because I had begun to suspect who occupied the place and to try and ascertain how the Rembrandt engraving got into 218 Brunswick Square."

"Well, I found out who the foe was. And I have a pretty good idea why he played that trick upon me. He knew that Enid Henson and myself were engaged; he could see what a danger to his schemes it would be to have a man like myself in the family. Then the second Rembrandt turned up, and there was his chance for wiping me off the slate. After that came the terrible family scandal between Lord Littimer and his wife. I cannot tell you anything of that, because I cannot speak with definite authority. But you could judge of the effect of it on Lady Littimer to-night."

"The poor lady whom you met as Mrs. Henson is really Lady Littimer. Henson is her maiden name, and those girls are her nieces. Trouble has turned the poor woman's brain. And at the bottom of the whole mystery is Reginald Henson, who is not only nephew on his mother's side, but is also next heir but one to the Littimer title. At the present moment he is blackmailing that unhappy creature, and is manoeuvring to get the whole of her large fortune in his hands. Reginald Henson is the man those girls want to circumvent, and for that reason they came to you. And Henson has found it out to a certain extent and placed you in an awkward position."

"But does he know what I advised one of the girls—my princess of the dark room—to do?"

"I don't fancy he does. But I confess you startled me to-night."

"What do you mean by that?"

(To be continued.)

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