

Prince Rupert's Ring;

OR, THE HOUSE OF THE
SILENT SORROW.

CHAPTER XXI.

Lord Littimer returned from a ride to one of his tenants.

"You have always been used to this class of life?" Littimer asked.

"There you are quite mistaken," Christabel said, coolly. "But your remark, my lord, savors slightly of impertinent curiosity. I might as well ask you why your family is not here."

"We agreed to differ," Littimer responded. "I recollect it caused me a great deal of annoyance at the time. And my son chose to take his mother's part."

The conversation ended abruptly. That night in the drawing-room Lord Littimer said, "The drawing-room is at your disposal, though I rarely enter it myself. I always retire at eleven, but that need not bind you in any way. It has been altogether a most delightful evening."

But Christabel did not dally long in the drawing-room. She retired to her room, where she changed her dress for a simple black gown. A big clock somewhere was striking twelve as she finished. She looked out of her door. The whole house was in darkness.

She paused for a moment as if afraid, then stepped into the corridor. She carried something shining in her hands. She stood just for an instant with a feeling that somebody was climbing up the ivy outside the house. She felt her way along until she came to the alcove containing the Rembrandt and then she stopped. Her hand slid along the wall till her fingers touched the switch of the electric light.

She stood for a long time there perfectly motionless. The rattling of the ivy came in jerks, spasmodically, stopping every now and then and resuming again.

Leaning forward, Christabel could hear the sound of labored breathing. She seemed to see the outline of an arm outside, she could catch the quick rattle of the sash, she could almost see a bent wire crooked through the beaded edges of the casement. The window swung noiselessly back and a figure stood poised on the ledge outside.

The intruder dropped inside and pulled the window behind him. Evidently he was on familiar ground, though he seemed to be seeking an unfamiliar object. Christabel's hand stole along to the switch; there was a click, and the alcove was bathed in brilliant light. The intruder shrank back with a startled cry.

"Why not come in through the front door, Mr. Littimer?" Christabel drawled, coolly. "That is the way you used to enter when you had been out contrary to parental instructions and the keepers expected to have a fracas with the poachers. Your bedroom being exactly opposite, detection was no easy matter. Your bedroom has never been touched since you left. The key is still outside the door. Will you kindly enter it?"

"But—" Frank stammered. "But I assure you that I cannot—" "Take the Rembrandt away. You cannot. The frame is of iron, and it is fastened to the wall. Please go to your room."

"Now, if you approach that window again I am pretty certain that my revolver will go off. You see, I am an American, and we are so careless with such weapons. Please go to your room at once."

"And if I refuse your ridiculous request?"

"If you refuse I shall hold you up with my weapon and alarm the whole house. But I don't want to do that, for the sake of the other man. He is so very respectable, you know. Yes, it is just as I expected. He is coming up the ivy to investigate himself. Go!"

The revolver covered Littimer quite steadily. He backed before the weapon, backed until he was in the doorway. Suddenly the girl gave him a push, shut the door too, and turned the key in the lock. Almost at the same instant a bulky figure loomed large in the window-frame.

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The burly man contrived to squeeze through the narrow casement at length and stood breathing loudly in the corridor. It was not a pleasant sight that met Christabel's gaze—a big man with a white, set face and rolling eyes and a stiff bandage about his throat. Evidently the intruder was utterly exhausted, for he dropped into a chair and nursed his head between his hands.

"Now what has become of that fool?" he muttered. "Ah!"

He looked round him uneasily, but his expression changed as his eyes fell on the Rembrandt. He staggered toward the picture and endeavored to take it gently from the support.

"I guess that it can't be done," Christabel said, drawlingly. "See, stranger?"

Reginald Henson fairly gasped. "I—I beg your pardon," he stammered.

"I said it can't be done," the girl drawled, coolly. "The frame is made of iron and it is fixed to the wall by four long stays. I persuaded Lord Littimer to have it done. And when I heard you two prowling about down there I was glad. I've got the other one safe."

"Oh, you've got the other one safe?" Henson said.

He would have liked to burst out into a torrent of passion, only he recognized his position. It was anything but nice for a man of his distinguished position to be detected in an act suspiciously like vulgar burglary.

"Are you aware who I am?" he asked.

"What does it matter? I've got the other one, and no doubt he will be identified by the police. If he doesn't say too much he may get off with a light sentence. It is quite easy to see that you are the greater scoundrel of the two."

"My dear young lady, do you actually take me for a burglar. I am a very old friend and relative of Lord Littimer's."

"Oh, indeed. And is the other man a relative of Lord Littimer's also?"

"Oh, why, confound it, yes. The other man, as you called him, is Lord Littimer's only son."

"Well, you are certainly a cool hand," she said. "And you really expect me to believe a fairy story like that?"

"I admit that appearances are against me," Henson said, humbly. "But I am speaking the truth."

"Oh, indeed. Then why didn't you come in through the front door?"

"I am afraid I shall have to make a clean breast of it," Henson said, with what he fondly imagined to be an engaging smile. "You may, perhaps, be aware that yonder Rembrandt has a history. It was stolen from its present owner once, and I have always said that it will be stolen again. Many a time have I urged Lord Littimer to make it secure."

"I came down here to see my very noble relative, and his son accompanied me. I came to try and make peace between father and son. But that is a family matter which, forgive me, I cannot discuss with a stranger. Our train was late, or we should have been here long ago. On reaching the castle it struck me as a good idea to give Lord Littimer a lesson as to his carelessness. My idea was to climb through the window, abstract the Rembrandt, and slip quietly into my usual bedroom here. Then in the morning, after the picture has been missed, I was going to tell the whole story. That is why Mr. Littimer entered this way and why I followed when I found that he had failed to return. It was a foolish thing to do, but the denouement has been most humiliating. I assure you that is all."

"Not quite," Christabel drawled. "You must tell your story to Lord Littimer before you sleep."

"But, my dear young lady, I beg of you, implore you—"

"I'm to let you go quietly to bed and retire myself, so that when morning arrives you will be missing together with as much plunder as you can carry away. No, sir." Henson advanced angrily. His

prudence had gone for the time. As he came down upon Christabel she raised her revolver and fired two shots in quick succession over Henson's shoulder. The noise went echoing and reverberating along the corridor like a crackling of thunder. A door came open with a click, then a voice demanded to know what was wrong.

Henson dropped into a chair and groaned. Lord Littimer, elegantly attired in a suit of silk pajamas and carrying a revolver, came coolly down the corridor. A curious servant or two would have followed, but he waved them back.

"Miss Lee," he said, with a faint, sarcastic emphasis, "and my dear friend and relative, Reginald Henson—Reginald, the future owner of Littimer Castle!"

"Reginald, what does this mean?"

"The young lady persisted in taking me for a burglar," he groaned.

"And why not?" Christabel demanded. "I heard voices in the forecourt below and footsteps creeping along. I came into the corridor with my revolver. Presently one of the men climbed up the ivy and got into the corridor. I covered him with my revolver and fairly drove him into a bedroom and locked him in."

"So you killed with both barrels?" Littimer cried.

"Then the other one came. He came to steal the Rembrandt."

"Nothing of the kind," the wretched Henson cried. "I came to give you a lesson, Lord Littimer. My idea was to get in through the window, steal the Rembrandt, and, when you had missed it, confess the whole story. My character is safe."

"Giddy," Littimer said reproachfully. "You are so young, so boyish, so buoyant, Reginald. What would your future constituents have said had they seen you creeping up the ivy? Egad, this would be a lovely story for one of those prying society papers. 'The Philanthropist and the Picture.' I've a good mind to send it myself."

Littimer sat down and laughed with pure enjoyment.

"And where is the other party-ride?" he asked, presently.

Christabel's hand shook as she turned the key in the door.

"I am afraid you are going to have an unpleasant surprise," Henson said.

Littimer glanced keenly at the speaker. All the laughter died out of his eyes; his face grew set and stern as Frank Littimer emerged into the light.

"And what are you doing here?" he asked. "What do you expect to gain by taking part in a fool's trick like this? Did I not tell you never to show your face here again? Get out of my sight, your presence angers me. Go, and never let me see you again. Reginald, you were a fool to bring that boy here tonight. See him off the premises and fasten the door again."

Henson and Frank Littimer were



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disappearing in the direction of the staircase.

"I don't fancy I shall care very much for your distinguished friend Reginald Henson," Christabel said.

Littimer smiled. "A slimy, fawning hound," he whispered. "And the best of it is that he imagines that I hold the highest regard for him. Good-night."

CHAPTER XXII.

A little later, and Christabel sat in her room.

"Good night's work," she said to herself. "Now the danger is passed and now that I am away from that dreadful house I feel a different being. And I hardly need my disguise—even at this moment I believe that Enid would not recognize me. Well, here I am, and I don't fancy that anybody will recognize Christabel Lee and Chris Henson for one and the same person."

She sat there letting her thoughts drift along idly. Reginald Henson would have felt less easy had he known what these thoughts were. Up to now that oily scoundrel hugged himself with the delusion that nobody besides Frank Littimer and himself knew that the second copy of "The Crimson Blind" had passed into Bell's possession.

Chris was up betimes in the morning and out on the terrace. She felt no further uneasiness on the score of the disguise now. Chris smiled as she saw Henson lumbering towards her.

"The rose blooms early here," he said, gallantly. "Let me express the hope that you have quite forgiven me for the fright I gave you last night."

"I guess I don't recollect the fright," Chris drawled. "And if there was any fright I calculate it was on the other side."

"Do you know, you remind me very much of somebody," he went on. "Lord Littimer tells me you are an American."

"The Stars and Stripes," Chris laughed. "Now, if you happen to know anything about Boston—"

"I never was in Boston in my life," Henson replied, hastily. The name seemed to render him uneasy. "Have you been in England very long?"

Chris replied that she was enjoying England for the first time. As she was speaking one of Littimer's bloodhounds came bounding up to her.

"Do you like dogs, Mr. Henson?" she asked.

"I loathe them," Henson growled.

"We are going to be great friends, that doggie and I," Chris said, gently. "And I don't like you any the better, Mr. Henson, because you don't like dogs and they don't like you. Dogs are far better judges of character than you imagine. Dr. Bell says—"

"What Dr. Bell?" Henson demanded, swiftly.

"Dr. Hatherly Bell," she said. "He used to be a famous man before he fell into disgrace over something or another. I heard him lecture on the animal instincts in Boston once, and he said—but as you don't care for dogs it doesn't matter what he said."

"It is just a little strange that you should mention his name here, especially after what had happened last night. Of course you have heard that the Rembrandt print was stolen once?"

"Certainly," she replied.

"Well, the man who stole the Rembrandt was Dr. Hatherly Bell. But here comes Littimer in one of his moods. He appears to be angry about something."

Littimer strode up, with a frown on his face and a telegram in his hand.

"Think of the audacity," he said. "Hatherly Bell has wired that he will be here some time after dinner."

"Good heavens!" Henson burst out. "I—I mean, what colossal impudence!"

"And when does Dr. Bell arrive?" Henson asked.

"He will probably reach Monmouth Station by the ten o'clock train. I'll send a groom to meet the train with a letter. When Bell has read that letter he will not come here."

"I don't think I should do that," Henson said, respectfully. "I should suffer Bell to come. As a Christian I should deem it my duty to do so. There is always a chance—a chance that we have misjudged a man on false evidence."

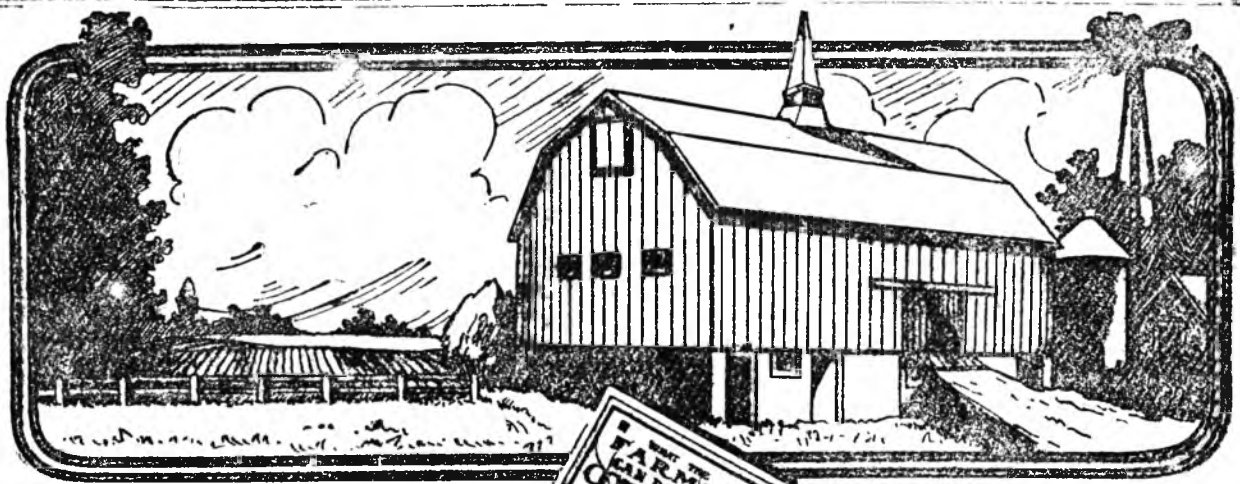
"I should see him, my lord; oh, yes, I should most undoubtedly see him."

"And so should I," Chris put in, swiftly.

"In the presence of so much goodness and beauty I feel quite lost," he said. "Very well, Henson, I'll see Bell."

(To be continued.)

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