

# Prince Rupert's Ring;

OR, THE HOUSE OF THE  
SILENT SORROW.

## CHAPTER XXII.—(Cont'd)

Henson strolled away with a sigh of gentle pleasure. Once out of sight he flew to the library, where he scribbled a couple of telegrams. They were carefully worded and related to some apocryphal parcel required without delay, and calculated to convey nothing to the lay mind. A servant was despatched to the village with them.

Henson would have been pleased had he known that the fascinating little American had waylaid his messenger and read his telegrams under the plea of verifying one of the addresses. A moment or two later and those addresses were carefully noted down in a pocket-book. It was past five before Chris found herself with a little time on her hands again. She went into the garden. There was a tiny arbor on a terrace overlooking the sea to which Chris had taken a particular fancy. She picked her way demurely along the grass paths between the roses until she suddenly emerged upon the terrace.

Somebody was in the arbor, two people talking earnestly. One man stood up with his back to Chris, one hand gripping the outside ragged bark of the arbor frame. Chris could see the hand turned back distinctly. A piece of bark was being crumbled under a strong thumb. Such a thumb!

It was as if at some time it had been smashed flat with a hammer, a broad, strong, cruel-looking thumb, flat and sinister-looking as the head of a snake. In the centre was one tiny, perfectly formed nail.

The owner of the thumb stepped back the better to give way to a fit of hoarse laughter. He turned slightly aside and his eyes met those of Chris. They were small eyes set in a coarse, brutal face. It came quite as a shock to see that the stranger was in clerical garb.

"I—I beg your pardon," Chris stammered.

Henson emerged from the arbor. He appeared confused.

"Please don't go away," he said. "Mr. Merritt will think that he has alarmed you. Miss Lee, this is my very good friend and co-worker in the field, the Reverend James Merritt."

"Is Mr. Merritt a friend of Lord Littimer's?" Chris asked.

"Littimer hates the cloth," Henson replied. "I met my good friend by accident in the village and I brought him here for a chat. Mr. Merritt is taking a holiday."

"Have you been in the Church long, Mr. Merritt?" she added.

Merritt said hoarsely that he had not been in the Church very long. Henson was obviously ill at ease. In his suave, diplomatic way he contrived to manoeuvre Merritt off the ground at length.

The uneasiness in Henson's manner gradually disappeared. Evidently the girl suspected nothing.

Dinner came at length, dinner served in the great hall in honor of the recently arrived guest, and set up in all the panoply and splendor that Littimer affected at times.

Henson shook his head playfully at all this show and spender.

"Of course Henson pretends to condemn all this kind of thing," Littimer said. "He would have you believe that when he comes into his own the plate and wine will be sold for the benefit of the poor, and the seats of the mighty filled with decayed governesses and antiquated shopwalkers."

"I hope that time may long be deferred," Henson murmured.

"And so do I," Littimer said, drily, "which is one of the disadvantages of being conservative. By the way who was that truculent-looking scoundrel I saw with you this afternoon?"

Henson hastened to explain. Littimer was emphatically of opinion that such visitors were better kept at a distance.

"There was a time when the enterprising burglar got his knowledge of the domestic and physical geography of a house from the servants," he said. "Now he reforms, with the great advantage that he can lay his plan of campaign from personal observation."

"You would not speak thus if you knew Merritt," said Henson.

"All the same, I don't want the

privilege," Littimer smiled. "A man with a face like that couldn't reform; nature would resent such an enormity. And yet you can never tell. Physically speaking, my quondam friend Hatherly Bell has a perfect face."

"I confess I am anxious to see him," Chris said.

"Well, you will not have long to wait now," Littimer said. "Bell is due at any moment after eleven. Coffee in the balcony, please."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a gloriously warm night. Down below, the sea beat with a gentle sway against the cliffs. Chris strolled quietly down the garden with her mind at peace for a time. A figure slipped gently past her on the grass, but she utterly failed to notice it.

"An exceedingly nice girl, that," Littimer was saying, "and distinctly amusing. Excuse me if I leave you here—a tendency to ague and English night air don't blend together."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

It was the very moment that Henson had been waiting for. He sprang to his feet and made his way hurriedly across the lawn to what seemed to be the very edge of the cliff and disappeared. Above the gloom a head appeared.

"That you, Merritt?" Henson asked, hoarsely.

"Oh, it's me right enough," came the reply. "Good job as I'm used to a seafaring life, or I should never have got up those cliffs. Have you got the things?"

"Got everything, pardner. Got a proper wipe over the skull, too."

"How on earth did you manage to do that?"

"Meddling with Bell, of course."

"So he got the best of you, eh?"

"Rather! I fancied that I was pretty strong, but—well, it doesn't matter. Here I am with the tools, and I ain't going to fail this time. Before Bell comes the little trap will be ready and you will be able to prove an alibi."

Henson chuckled hoarsely.

"Get along," he said. "There is no time to lose."

Merritt nodded and began to make his way upward. Some way above him Chris was looking down. She watched eagerly. Just below her the big electric light on the castle tower cast a band of flame athwart the cliff. Presently she saw a hand uplifted into the belt of flame, a hand grasping for a ledge of rock, and a quickly stifled cry rose to her lips. The thumb was smashed flat.

Chris's heart gave one quick leap. She needed nobody to tell her that the owner of the hand was James Merritt. Chris peered eagerly down until the intruder looked up. Then she jerked back. The action was disastrous, however, for it shook Chris's diamond star from her head, and it fell gently almost at the feet of the climber. An instant later and his eyes had fallen upon it.

"What bloomin' luck," he said, hoarsely. "I suppose that girl yonder must have dropped it over. Well, it is as good as a couple of hundred pound to me, anyway."

To Chris's quivering indignation he slipped the star into his breast-pocket. Nearer and nearer the man with the maimed thumb came. Chris stepped back into the shadow as he made his way toward the castle. Two minutes, five minutes, elapsed before she moved.

What was that? Surely a voice somewhere near her moaning for help. Her sense of humanity had been touched, she had forgotten Merritt entirely.

"Who are you?" Chris shouted.

"And where are you?"

"Henson," came the totally unexpected reply. "I'm down below on a ledge of rock. No, I'm not particularly badly hurt, but I dare not move."

Chris paused for a moment, utterly bewildered. Henson must have been on the look-out for his accomplice, she thought, and had missed his footing and fallen.

"I cannot see anything of you," she said.

"All the same I can see your outline," Henson said, dismally.

"If I had a rope I should have the proper confidence to climb up again. And there is a coil of rope in the arbor close to you. Hang it straight down over that middle boulder and fasten your end round one of those iron pilasters."

The rope was there as Henson stated; indeed, he had placed it there himself. With the utmost coolness and courage Chris did as she was desired, and presently Henson, with every appearance of utter exhaustion, climbed over the ledge to the terrace. At the same moment an owl hooted twice from the long belt of trees at the bottom of the garden.

"I hope you are none the worse for your adventure?" Chris asked, politely.

Henson said sententiously that he fancied not. His familiarity with the cliffs had led him too far. If he had not fallen on a ledge of rock goodness only knows what might have happened. Would Chris be so good as to lend him the benefit of her arm back to the castle? Chris was willing, but she was full of curiosity at the same time. Had Henson really been in danger, or was the whole thing some part of an elaborate and cunning plot?

They passed slowly along till the lights here and there from the castle shone on their faces. At the same time a carriage had driven up to the hall door and a visitor was getting out. With a strange sense of eagerness and pleasure Chris recognized the handsome features and misshapen figure of Hatherly Bell.

"The expected guest has arrived," Henson said.

"He is very handsome," she contrived to say, steadily.

"Handsome is that handsome does," Henson quoted. "Let us hope that Dr. Bell will succeed in his mission. He has my best wishes."

Chris turned away and walked as slowly as possible up the stairs. Another minute with that slimy hypocrite and she felt she must betray herself. Once out of sight she flew along the corridor and snapped up the electric light. She fell back with a stifled cry of dismay, but was more sorrowful than surprised.

"I expected it," she said, "I knew that this was the thing they were after."

The precious copy of Rembrandt was no longer there!

## CHAPTER XXIV.

It seemed to Hatherly Bell that the first thing to be done was to see Lord Littimer. He proceeded to a telegraph office the first thing the following morning and wired Littimer to the effect that he must see him on important business. He had an hour or two at his disposal, so he took a cab as far as Downend Terrace. He found David Steel in the conservatory.

"My next move is to go to Littimer and convince him that he has done me a great wrong," said Bell. "I am bound to have Littimer's ear once more."

"You are going to show him the spare Rembrandt, eh?"

"That's it. I flatter myself I shall astonish him. I feel all the safer because nobody knows I have the engraving."

"My dear chap, somebody knows you have the picture."

"Impossible!" Bell exclaimed. "Only yourself and Enid Henson can possibly be aware that—"

"All the same, I am speaking the truth," David said, and he told of the attempt of the man with the maimed thumb to take it.

Bell nodded thoughtfully. The information was of the greatest possible value to him. It told him quite plainly that Reginald Henson knew exactly what had happened. Under ordinary circumstances by this time Henson would be on his way to Littimer Castle, there to checkmate the man he had so deeply injured. But unfortunately Henson was in his bed, or so Bell imagined.

"I am really obliged to you," Bell said. "Your information is likely to be of the greatest possible service to me."

Bell bustled off and before five o'clock he was in the train for London. It was nearly eleven o'clock before he reached Moreton Station. It did not matter much because Littimer had said that a carriage should meet him.

However, there was no conveyance of any kind outside the station. A sleepy porter said a carriage from the castle had come to the station, but that some clerical gentleman had come along and counter-

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manded it. Whereupon the dog-cart had departed.

"What sort of a parson was it?" Bell asked.

"I only just saw his face," the porter yawned. "Dressed in black, with a white tie and a straw hat. Walked in a slouching kind of way with his hands down; new curate from St. Albans, perhaps. Looked like a chap as could take care of himself in a row."

"Thanks," Bell said, curtly. "I'll manage the walk; it's only two miles. Good-night."

Bell's face was grim and set as he stepped out into the road. He knew fairly well what this meant. It was pretty evident that his arch-enemy knew his movements perfectly well, and that a vigorous attempt was being made to prevent him reaching the castle.

Somebody was coming down the lonely road towards him, somebody in clerical attire. The stranger stopped and politely inquired if he was on the right way to Moreton Station. Bell responded as politely that he was, and asked to know the time. Not that he cared any thing about the time; what he really wanted was to see the stranger's hands. The little ruse was successful. In the dim light Bell could see a flattened, hideous thumb with the pink parody of a nail upon it.

"Thanks, very much," he said crisply. "Keep straight on."

He half turned as the stranger swung round. The latter darted at Bell, but he came too late. Bell's fist shot out and caught him fairly on the forehead. Then the stick in Bell's left hand came down with crushing force on the prostrate man's skull. So utterly dazed and surprised was he that he lay on the ground for a moment, panting heavily.

"You murderous ruffian," Bell gasped. "You escaped convict in an honest man's clothes. Get up! So you are the fellow—"

He paused suddenly, undesirous of letting the rascal see that he knew too much. The other man rolled over suddenly like a cat and made a dash for a gap in the hedge. He was gone like a flash.

"Henson seems to be pretty well served," he muttered, grimly.

Meanwhile, the man with the thumb was flying over the fields in the direction of Littimer. He made his way across country to the cliffs, and proceeded to scramble along them till he lay hidden just under the terraces at Littimer Castle. He lay there, panting and breathing heavily, waiting for the signal to come.

Meanwhile, Bell was jogging along placidly and with no fear in his heart at all. He did not need anybody to tell him what was the object of his late antagonist's attack. He knew perfectly well that if the ruffian had got the better of him he would never have seen the Rembrandt again. Presently Bell could see the lights of the castle.

By the lodge-gates stood a dog-cart; in the flare of the lamps Bell recognized the features of the driver, a very old servant of Littimer's. Bell took in the situation at a glance.

"Is this the way you come for me, Lund?" he asked.

"I'm very sorry, sir," Lund replied. "But a clergyman near the station said you had gone another way, so I turned back. And when I got here I couldn't make top nor tail of the story. Bless if I wasn't a bit nervous that it might have been some plan to rob you."

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