

Prince Rupert's Ring;

OR, THE HOUSE OF THE SILENT SORROW.

CHAPTER XXVII.—(Cont'd)

Henson forced a smile to his face and a hand from his side as he approached Merritt and the rest. It was not until the two found themselves alone that the mask was dropped.

"You infernally insolent scoundrel," Henson said, between his teeth. "How dare you come here?"

"I didn't come on my own 'ook," Merritt whined. "That young lady came and fetched me, and there's to be high jinks 'ere—a bazaar for the benefit of pore criminals as can't get no work to do. And I'm goin' to make a speech, like as I used to gull the chaplains. Lor', it's funny, ain't it?"

Henson failed to see the humor of the situation. He was uneasy and suspicious. Moreover, he was puzzled by this American girl.

"Why didn't you do as I told you last night?"

"Did," said Merritt, curtly. "Got the picture and took it home with me."

"You liar! The picture is in the corridor at the present time."

"Liar yourself! I've got the picture on my mantle in my sitting-room rolled up as you told me to roll it up and tied with a piece of cotton. It was your own idea as the thing was to be left about casual-like as being less calculated to excite suspicion. And there it is at the present moment, and I'll take my oath to it."

Henson fairly gasped. He had solved many ingenious puzzles in his time, but this one was utterly beyond him.

"Some trick of Dr. Bell's perhaps," Merritt suggested.

"Bell suspects nothing. He is absolutely friendly to me. He would not disguise his feelings like that. Upon my word I was never so utterly at sea before in all my life. Do you suppose Miss Lee noticed anything when she called to-day?"

"Not a bit of it," said Merritt, confidently. "She came to see me; she had no eyes for anybody but your humble servant. Where did she get my address from? Why, didn't you introduce me to the lady yourself, and didn't I tell her I was staying at Moreton Wells for a time? I'm goin' to live in clover for a bit, my pippin. Cigars and champagne, wine and all the rest of it."

"I wish you were at the bottom of the sea before you came here," Henson growled. "You mind and be careful what you're doing with the champagne. They don't drink by the tumbler in the society you are in now, remember. Just one or two glasses and no more."

Apparently the hint was not lost on Merritt, for dinner found him in a chastened mood. His natural audacity was depressed by the splendor and luxury around him. Henson said very little. He was too busily engaged in watching his confederate.

The dinner came to an end at length, to Henson's great relief, and presently the whole party wandered out to the terrace. Bell dropped behind with Chris.

"Now is your time," he whispered.

Chris returned to the library and soon she was busy at the telephone. "Are you there?" she asked, quietly. "Is that you, Mr. Steel?"

"Yes, answered Steel. "Who are you?"

"Can't you guess?" Chris replied. "This is not the first time I have called. You have not forgotten 218 Brunswick Square yet?"

"So you are my fair friend whom I saw in the dark?" he said. "Yes, I recognize your voice now. You are Miss Chris. I hope you are not going to get me into trouble again."

"No, but I am going to ask your advice and assistance. I want you to be so good as to give me the plot of a story after I have told you the details. And you are to scheme the thing out at once, please, because delay is dangerous. Dr. Bell—"

"What's that? Will you tell me where you are speaking from?"

"I am at present located at Littimer Castle. Yes, Dr. Bell is here. Do you want him?"

"I should think so," Steel exclaimed. "Please tell him at once that the man who was found here half dead got up and dressed himself in the absence of the nurse and walked out of the hospital this morning."

The voice was urgent, not to say imperative. Chris dropped the receiver and crept into the darkness in the direction of the terrace.

* * * * *

Bell seemed to know by intuition that Chris required him.

"Something has happened," he whispered, as he came up.

"Van Sneek has gone," she answered.

"Gone?" Bell echoed, blankly. "Steel wants me, of course?"

"He suggests that you should go down to Brighton without delay."

"All right, I'll make some excuse to take the first train in the morning. We've got a fine start of Henson, and that's a good thing. If Van Sneek comes within his net we shall have a deal of trouble. I had hoped to get permission to operate on Van Sneek, and relied upon him to solve the mystery. And now you had better go back to your telephone."

Chris hurried back and told her story to David.

"Here is the plot in a nutshell," David answered. "Your sister has lost a diamond star. She gives a minute description of it to the police, and drops a hint to the effect that she believes it was taken away by mistake—in other words, was stolen—from her in London by a chance acquaintance called Christabel Lee. The full description of the star will be printed in the Police Gazette, a copy of which every respectable pawnbroker always gets regularly. Rutter and Co., will see the advertisement, and they will communicate with the police. The Reverend James Merritt will be arrested at the castle. Knowing his antecedents, the police will not stand upon any ceremony with him. You will be filled with remorse. You have plunged back into a career of crime again a being who was slowly climbing into the straight path once more. You take the blame upon yourself—it was at your instigation that Merritt pawned the star."

"You save Mr. Merritt, there is a bond of sympathy between you, he will regard you as a great light in his interesting profession. You saved him because you had appropriated the star yourself."

"And go to jail instead of Mr. Merritt?"

"Not a bit of it. The star you deemed to be yours. You had one very like it when you saw Miss Henson, when you were staying in London at the same hotel. By some means the jewels got mixed. You are confident that an exchange has been made. Also you are confident that if Miss Henson will search her jewel-case she will find a valuable star that does not belong to her. Miss Henson does so, she is distressed beyond measure, she offers all kinds of apologies. Exit the police. You need not tell Merritt how you get out of the difficulty, and thus you increase his respect for you. There, that would make a very ingenious and plausible magazine story. It should be more convincing in real life."

"Capital!" Chris murmured. "What an advantage it is to have a novelist to advise one! Many, many thanks for all your kindness. Good-night!"

Chris rang off with a certain sense of relief. It was some time later before she had a chance of conveying to Bell what had happened. He listened gravely to all that Chris had to say.

"Just the sort of feather-brained idea that would occur to a novelist," he said. "For my part, I should prefer to confront Merritt with his theft, and keep the upper hand of him that way."

"And he would mistrust me and betray me at the first opportunity. Besides, in that case, he would know at once that I wanted to get

to the bottom of his connection with Reginald Henson. Mr. Steel's plan may be bizarre, but it is safe."

Chris was down early the following morning, only to find Bell at breakfast with every sign of making an early departure. He was very sorry, he explained, gravely, to his host and Chris, but his letters gave him no option. He would come back in a day or two, if he might. A moment later Henson came into the room, ostentatiously studying a timetable.

"And where are you going?" Littimer asked. "Why do you all abandon me? Reginald, do you mean to say that you are going to refuse me the light of your countenance?"

"Is Dr. Bell going too?" Henson asked.

"Business," Bell said. "I came here at great personal inconvenience. And you?"

"London," Henson replied. "A meeting to-day that I cannot get out of. A couple of letters by this morning's post have decided me."

Chris said nothing; she appeared to be quite indifferent until she had a chance to speak to Bell alone. She looked a little anxious.

"He has found out about Van Sneek," she said. "Truly he is a marvelous man! And he had no letters this morning. I opened the post-bag personally. But I'm glad he's going, because I shall have James Merritt all to myself."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

On the whole, Mr. James Merritt, ex-convict and now humanitarian, was enjoying himself immensely.

Still, there is always a crumbled lose-leaf somewhere, and Merritt had his. A few days after Henson departed so hurriedly for town the stolen Rembrandt disappeared from Merritt's rooms. Perhaps Merritt would have been less easy in Littimer's society had he known that the missing print was securely locked away in the latter's strong room. He declined to worry over the matter until Henson's return. It was not for him to know, yet, that Chris had actually gone over to Moreton Wells, and, during the absence of Merritt's landlady, calmly walked into the house and taken the picture away.

"You are going to see some fun presently," she said, coolly, to the astonished Littimer, as she laid the missing picture before him. "No, I shall not tell you anything more at present. You shall hear the whole story when Reginald Henson stands in the pillory before you. You know now that Henson was at the bottom of the plot to destroy Dr. Bell's character?"

"I always felt that our Reginald was a great scoundrel," Littimer said. "And if you succeed in exposing him thoroughly I shall watch the performance with pleasure."

There was a brightness and restlessness about Chris to-day that considerably added to her charms. It was nearly a week now since

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Bell and Henson had departed, and in the meantime Chris had heard nothing from Longdean. Half-an-hour before a telegram had arrived to the effect that a gentleman in a blue coat might be expected at Littimer Castle at any moment.

"Come on the terrace," she said, when Merritt arrived. "I have something very serious to say to you. Mr. Merritt, you have got us both into very serious trouble. Why did you do it?"

"Ain't done nothing," Merritt said, doggedly. "What's up?"

"Er—it's about my diamond star," said Chris. "I lost it a few days ago. If I had known what was going to happen I should have put up with my loss. But I made inquiries through the police without saying a word to anybody, and now I find the star was pawned in Moreton Wells."

"Oh, lor," Merritt gasped. "You don't mean to say the police know that, Miss?"

"Indeed I do. And I am informed that they may come here and arrest you at any moment. I fear there is no escape for you—you pawned the thing yourself in your own name. What a thousand pities you yielded to sudden temptation."

"But I found it," Merritt whined. "I'll take my oath I found it under the terrace."

Chris shook her head sadly. "And just as you were getting on so nicely," she said.

"That's it," Merritt whined, brokenly. "Just as I was properly spoofing everybody as I—I mean just as I was getting used to a better life. But you save me, miss; you can say as you were hard up for money and that, knowing as I knew the ropes, you got me to pawn it for you. Put it in that way and there's not a policeman in England as can touch me."

"I had thought of it," Chris said. "But, but—Mr. Merritt, I have a terrible confession to make. It was not I who started the police; it was somebody else. You see, the star was not my property at all. I—I got it in London."

"You don't mean to say you nicked it?" he asked. "Well, well."

Chris bent her face lower to conceal her amusement.

"I have telegraphed to the lady, who is more or less of a friend of mine," she said. "I have urged her to take no further steps in the matter. I fancy that she is a good

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kind girl and that—but a reply might come at any time."

There was a reply on the way now, as Chris knew perfectly well. The whole thing had been carefully arranged and planned to the moment by Steel and the others.

"I dare say they'll let you down easy," Merritt said, disconsolately; "but it'll be hot for me. I've copped it too many times before, you see."

"Yes, I see," Chris said, thoughtfully. "Mr. Merritt, I have made up my mind; if I had not—er—borrowed that star, it would not have been lost, and you would not have found it, and there would have been no trouble. My conscience would not rest if I allowed you to be dragged back into the old life again. I am going to save you—I am going to tell the police you pawned that star for me."

"Do that, and I'm your pal for life," he said, huskily. "And I never went back on a pal yet. Ask anybody as really knows me. 'Tain't as if you weren't one of us, neither. I'd give a trifle to know what your little game is here, eh?"

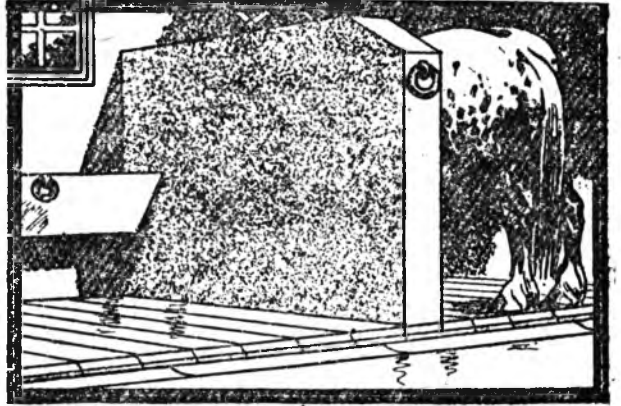
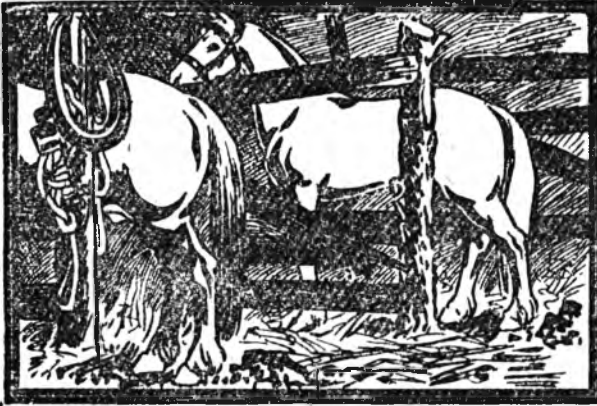
Chris smiled meaningly. Merritt's delusion was distinctly to be fostered.

"You shall help me then, presently," she said in a mysterious whisper. "Help me and keep your own counsel, and there will be the biggest job you ever had in your life."

(To be continued.)

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