# THE FATAL RUBY

BY

**CHARLES GARVICE**

Author of "Just a Girl," "Diana and Destiny," "In Wolf's Clothing," etc.

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(Continued.)

Smithers made his usual nautical response and retired; but Ronald felt too restless, too anxious, for bed, and he lit a pipe and went on to the verandah, from which he presently strolled to the garden, and he stood there for a minute or two, torturing himself with all kinds of apprehensions regarding Cara. The silence and the darkness were intense; but he was conscious, even in his preoccupation, of a peculiar stir in the atmosphere, the coming of a keener wind than that which usually visited the island. When his pipe was out, he went in and to bed, but he did not sleep for hours; and he lay awake blaming himself for not going straight to Raven's house and ascertaining whether Cara was there.

At last he fell into an uneasy sleep, in which he dreamed that Lemuel Raven and he were fighting for Cara, who was tied to their meeting-tree. He awoke with a start and heard some one hammering on the outer door of the chalet and calling his name. It was Vane's voice. It was not yet dawn, and was still pitch dark. Ronald sprang out of bed and hurried to the outer door, almost running into Smithers, who ran to the door and flung it open, for he, too, recognised Vane's voice.

Vane stepped in; he was wet, his face pale, his manner agitated.

"Hullo, Vane!" said Ronald. "What is it? Why have you come back?"

Without a word, Vane took from Smithers the lamp which he had lit, walked past them into the sitting-room, and, when Ronald had followed him ,closed and locked the door.

"Is all right." he asked hoarsely, and with a nervous twitching of his lips. The perspiration was standing on his brow in great drops.

"Yes, it's all right," said Ronald. "What ails you, man? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

Vane dropped into a chair and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"That's what I feel like," he said. "I don't know what's got hold of me. I don't generally act like a neurotic idiot. I've been uneasy every minute during the cruise. I've been haunted by a dread that something would happen, something go wrong. I had to come back; I tell you I had to! You are sure everything is right?"

"Quite sure," said Ronald. He poured out a stiff drink, and almost thrust it into Vane's hand, which shook as he took it and drank it off at a draught. "You're wet. The rain has started since I turned in. You must turn in yourself, Vane; your nerves are all wrong. Get outside another drink and go to bed."

Vane nodded, sat staring at the floor moodily for a little while, then, with a nod, went off to his room; but in a minute or two he was back, whiter than before, and with his lips sternly set.

"It's no use; I can't rest!" he said almost fiercely. "Call your man; we'll take some tools and go down there at once. Something—a vague fear—is driving me mad."

"Right!" said Ronald, for he saw it was useless to argue with him.

He called Smithers; they got a couple of picks and a spade, and, with the hurricane lantern partially screened, they left the chalet and penetrated into the intense darkness. Not a word was spoken. Smithers trotted beside them with a pick over his shoulder, as if there were nothing unusual or extraordinary in their proceedings. Vane walked hurriedly, and once he would have stumbled if Ronald had not caught him.

"For God's sake, be calm, Vane!" he said, in a low voice. "I was over the ground only a few hours ago; nothing car have happened."

Vane made no reply, and, moving as quickly as they could, they approached the spot indicated by the papers. Suddenly Vane stopped.

"I'm a fool," he said, in a hoarse whisper—" a weak, nervous fool. We'll go back, wait till tomorrow, get Shanks——"

"No, no!" said Ronald firmly. "We'll go on and have a look round at any rate, or you won't be able to rest."

Vane began to pace carefully as they came in line with the tree and the point of the cliff. Suddenly he stopped, snatched the lantern from Ronald's hand, waved it aloft, then uttered a cry—a cry of rage, of despair.

Ronald sprang forward, Smithers by his side, and Ronald echoed Vane's wild cry. For there, where a few hours ago had been plain, unbroken ground, were great holes and recently thrown-up mounds. Vane flung himself forward, and, on his knees beside the holes, uttered a groan, then rose, with his hands clenched at his sides, stareed vacantly before him. Ronald, kneeling, saw two rust-eaten iron chests lying at the bottom of the holes; the lids were open, the boxes were empty, the treasure had gone!

Now, strangely enough, Vane was the calmest of the three; for even Smithers, whose quick intelligence had been at work for some time past, fell to cursing; and Ronald was standing with his clenched fist upraised, his face working with rage and fury. Vane was the first to move, to speak.

"It is gone! We have been robbed!" he said hoarsely, but with an unnatural calmness.,

He took up the lantern, looked steadily at the rifled chests, then turned, as if unconscious of the presence of the others, and walked towards the chalet. As if all their senses were numbed, and walking like men in a dream, Ronald and Smithers followed him. He passed the chalet and went straight to the rock beside which he had buried the wallet. A glance showed them that the earth had been disturbed. The wallet had gone!

Vane drew a long breath and turned away to the chalet. Again they followed him; and Ronald went into the room with him. Smithers sat on the edge of the verandah and got out his pipe. Not one of the men had suggested, or even thought of, pursuing the unknown thieves who had stolen the treasure; each knew it would be useless to attempt to find them in that pitchy darkness—that long ere this they would have left the island.

Vane sank into a chair and unfastened his collar as if he were choking, and presently he looked up and said, almost inaudibly:

"I am sorry, Carew. It's my fault. I had a presentiment——"

"No," said Ronald thickly, his face white, his eyes full of remorse. "The fault was mine."

"Yours!" cried Vane, staring at him.

"Yes," said Ronald. "It is I who have robbed you—at least, I am the cause."

Vane sprang to his feet, and his hand went to his revolver:

"Yes; you can shoot if you like. I deserve it," said Ronald.

"Explain!" croke in Vane fiercely.

Ronald told him of the discovery of Cara on the other island, of her father, Lemuel Raven, of his—Ronald's—conviction that it was Raven who had been spying on them, had actually been in hiding, and had seen them bury the wallet. There could be no doubt that Raven and his accomplice, the deaf and dumb man, had stolen a march upon them and secured the treasure. He told the story with many pauses, with agitation, with a poignant remorse; but the effect on Vane was very different from that which Ronald had expected. As Ronald's confession proceeded, Vane grew calmer; he tossed the revolver on the table between them, and presently held out his hand.

"We've both been fools, Carew'," he said. "I don't know which is the worse. Don't take on, man; there's a kind of fate in these things. Besides, there was a woman in it! And when the woman comes on the scene ——!" He shrugged his shoulders.

For a moment or two Ronald could not command his voice; then he said:

"Vane, you're treating me too well. What can I say? what can I do? I fee'——"

"I know what you're feeling," said Vane, with a grim laugh. "But there is nothing to be done."

"We can follow them to the island," said Ronald.

"Yes, we can do that," said Vane; but, as he spoke, he shook his head hopelessly.

"We will go at once," said Ronald, with feverish impatience.

Vane smiled and held up his hand.

"Listen!" he said. "That's the storm; no boat could live in such a sea as must be raging out there. We must wait till tomorrow."

They sat up for the remainder of the night, and, as soon as the dawn had broken, they went down to the beach. On their way they glanced at the spot where the treasure had been buried; the ground was smooth again; Smithers had filled in the holes.

"That's a sensible chap of yours," was all Vane said.

The storm was still raging; the yacht had pulled out into deeper and safer water; it would have been impossible to launch a boat; it would have been worse than foolhardy to attempt to sail a yacht through channels of which they had no soundings. The wind did not drop until the following day; and, immediately the sea was calm enough, the three men went over to the other island.

With an aching heart Ronald steered them to the familiar landing-place. They climbed the beach; Ronald flew to the tree; there was no letter. They went straight—with watchful eyes and their hands upon their revolvers—towards the house. They came upon it—it was a rough affair, built of logs and planks—and Ronald looked up at the chimney. No smoke was rising from it; there was no sound or sight of life. The door was open, and the three men went into the house; it was empty; the ashes were cold on the rough hearth. Things of household use had been tossed aside; the whole place was in confusion, and if the persons who had occupied it had fled in haste.

Once again, Cara had disappeared!

### CHAPTER XX.

### Trespassers Beware!

Leaving Ronald and Vane in the hour of their bitter disappointment, we return to Thorden Hall.

To describe Dexter Reece as a baffled bloodhound would savour of exaggeration. When he heard from Evelyn that Lemuel Raven and the girl had disappeared, he felt almost overcome by hysterical nausea; for it seemed to him, after his recognition of the resemblance between the miniature and Cara, that he had not only chanced upon a clue, but had struck upon a scent which would lead him to the discovery of Sir Mortimer's daughter and the giant ruby—the giant ruby! He needed all his powers as an actor—and they were great—to conceal his agitation from Evelyn; and he got away by himself as quickly as possible.

Be sure it was not long before he made his way to the mill. The door was locked, but he forced it with the aid of a stone, and searched the place thoroughly. To his own mind it seemed wildly improbable that the murderer of Sir Mortimer, the man who had stolen the ruby, should have returned to a spot so near to the scene of his crime; but here were two solid facts which seemed to prove that he had done so—the girl's resemblance to the miniature, Lemuel Raven's flight immediately after the solitude of his life was broken into by the outer world. No doubt the man had taken fright at Evelyn's visits to the mill, and the friendship which had sprung up between her and Cara; no doubt, also, that his, Reece's, visit to the mill had confirmed Raven's apprehensions.

Dexter Reece went all over the place, even searched the tiny room in which Cara had slept; but he found nothing of any significance until he came upon the dark, triangular cupboard on the floor of the mill. He had brought a candle with him, and he went over the nook with minute care, and his sharp eyes detected the disturbance of the dry soil at the bottom of the cupboard. It was a place in which a man would conceal the ruby; and Dexter Reece felt as convinced that it had lain there and been removed as if he had seen Raven taken it up.

From the mill he went down to Port Dale, and, in the most casual and indifferent way, lit a cigarette, sauntered up and down the quay, and, after awhile, sank on to a seat near one on which Sandy was sitting. It was not difficult to get into conversation with the good-natured young giant; and Dexter Reece delicately led the way to the shipping news of the port; but, to his keen disappointment and disgust, Sandy could give no information which would enable him to pick up the clue.

"'Is; I think as I remember seein' Lemuel Raven and his gel—she's a rare beauty, that her be!—on the quay the other night; but I didn't take no particular notice of 'em, or whether they bided here or went aboard one of the vessels. Lemuel Raven, he 'ave been on the quay once or twice lately; on business, most like. Where do the vessels make for? Well, mostly for Wales, for coal; or Ireland, may be."

"Do they never sail for foreign ports?" asked Dexter Reece.

"Why, sartinly," replied Sandy; "they take clay from Shelford to France or Italy; 'tis a peculiar kind o' clay, which the furreigners can't get in their own countries; and they use it in their manufactories. Two or three ketches have left the port of late; but 'tis unknown to me exackly where they'm bound for."

Dexter Reece's heart sank. It would be impossible for him to trace two or three vessels, to discover on which one of them Lemuel Raven and the girl had been passengers. They had fled by sea. The man would be too cunning to go direct to his destination; he would reach it by a zig-zag route, by which it would be almost impossible to track him, unless the police were laid on the scent. And Dexter Reece could not use the police—must work absolutely unaided.

As he walked back to the Hall he was consumed by the dread that some other person might hit upon the connection between Lemuel Raven and the murder of Sir Mortimer, and identify the girl of the mill as Sir Mortimer's daughter, the stolen heiress; indeed, it would have have seemed wonderful to him that such suspicion had not already arisen if he had not known that crimes which have remained long undiscovered are either forgotten or are consigned to the limbo of mysteries which can never be solved. He himself would not have hit upon the clue, but for his discovery of the miniature.

When he reached the Hall he went straight to the cabinet, and, from the long-forgotten drawer in which the portrait had reposed for so many years, took it out, looked at it steadily with fevered eyes, then slipped it in his pocket. From that moment no one should see it until the hour arrived when it would suit his purpose to produce it.

At dinner that night he remarked to Evelyn, with just sufficient regret:

"I am afraid your protegee of the mill has quite disappeared. I happened to stroll up to the moor, and I looked in at the mill. It was quite deserted, and it seemed to me evident that they did not intend to return."

"Oh! do you think so," said Evelyn, with a sign. "I hope you are wrong. I should miss Cara very much; I have grown so fond of her, though we have known each other so short a time. But something tells me that you are right—that they will not come back. I heard at Port Dale that her father was a strange man; that he had never been friendly with any of the people, and that they all had an impression that he might one day go off in exactly the fashion he has done. I wish I knew where Cara had gone! I would write to her, get her to write to me; for I feel anxious about her."

"I am afraid it would be useless to try and track them," he said, with a shake of the head. There was a pause; then, in the most casual way, he remarked, "What a quaint affair that mill is! And it stands in such a beautiful situation. I'm afraid you'll laugh at me, Miss Desborough; but I have a fancy for owning, or at any rate renting, the mill. There are times when I crave for the rest which only absolute solitude can give; and I should love to have the mill for a place in which I could take refuge when the world presses too hardly."

Evelyn regarded him with a faint smile of surprise; then she nodded as if she understood; and, with a laugh, she roused her father from his usual reverie.

"Father, if Lemuel Raven doesn't come back—he has gone, you know—Mr. Reece would like to have the mill."

Sir Reginald raised his eyes and stared across the table with a frown.

"The mill? What in heaven's name for?" he demanded, with suppressed impatience.

"A mere fancy, sir," replied Dexter Reece.

Sir Reginald shrugged his shoulders with a kind of contemptuous consent; and Dexter Reece, with a little laugh, turned to Evelyn.

"Thank you very much," he said. "By the way, the man may come back; if he should, will you be so very kind as to wire to me?"

Evelyn promised that she would do so; and Dexter Reece slid away from the topic.

(To Be Continued.)

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