

The Slave of Silence

By Fred M. White

CONTINUED FROM LAST SUNDAY

CHAPTER XX

FIELD stepped into the theatre as the curtain was going up on the last of the brilliant trifles of the evening. In an upper box on the prompt side he saw the dark face and eager eyes of the Rajah of Aghad. He seemed to be looking for somebody, for his glasses were constantly in use. There was a restless air, too, about the Rajah, that showed that he was not altogether at his ease.

Field laid himself out for enjoyment for the next quarter of an hour. The heroine of the piece in the form of Miss Adela Vane was late in appearing. The thing was dragging, too, or so it seemed to Field. All at once there were voices at the back of the stage as if somebody was quarrelling. Suddenly the bright tuneful chorus broke off altogether and a female voice screamed. A little puff of smoke came from the stage.

In the twinkling of an eye the whole house rose and shuddered. There was a sharp crack-crackle, followed by smoke, and forked tongues of flame licked the imitation forest, and with a swish all the chorus fled from the stage. Far away up in the gallery somebody was roaring "Fire!" A rush to the doors was already taking place.

The smoke was getting thicker and blacker; the flames were making the place unpleasantly warm. Field could feel the heat on his face. He had been close to the stalls exit, and might have slipped away at once, but he had held his ground. It was he who stood with his back to the door now.

"I'll knock down the first man who tries to pass me," he cried. "There is plenty of time. For God's sake, control yourselves. Come quietly. Don't you know that the whole theatre can be emptied in three minutes if people will only go quietly? Now come along and don't press." The stern, hard tones were not without their effect. Field looked so calm and collected and confident himself, that the feeling spread quickly all over the stalls.

The stalls were moving quietly along now, and it was marvelous to see how quickly the place was being deserted. In less time than it takes to tell, everybody was outside. Like magic an engine had appeared, and men in helmets were jumping nimbly over the stalls laying their hose down. As Field turned to go a little cry from the stage attracted his attention.

A girl stood there, dressed as a Watteau shepherdess. She seemed absolutely dazed and frightened, a pretty and pathetic little figure in her great golden wig.

"Go back," Field yelled. "You'll have that blazing scenery on top of you. Why don't you go back to the stage door?"

The actress turned at last and shook her head. Tears were rolling down her face.

"I can't," she said. "The fire is too great. I was in my dressing-room, and I did not know. Oh, why doesn't somebody save me?"

Without any further loss of time Field jumped into the orchestra and scrambled onto the stage. The hot flames drove him back for the moment. He lifted the girl into his arms and made a bold leap over the orchestra into the stalls. Then he carried her out into the street and called for a cab.

"Where shall I tell the man to drive?" Field asked.

"I shall remember presently," the girl said. "I am altogether dazed and stupid for the moment. I can see nothing but fire and smoke. Let me think. Oh, yes, it is coming back to me. Yes, Mrs. Marsh, 124 Copeland avenue, Regent's Park. Oh, it is very good and kind of you. Will you let me tender my thanks when I am better?"

"I have done nothing," Field said modestly. A sudden idea occurred to him, accustomed as he was to think matters out quickly and in all kinds of startling surroundings. "If I may, I will call upon you tomorrow morning. Good-night."

The cab was whirled away, and Field went thoughtfully down the Strand. It seemed to him that he had seen the pretty little actress before, but then such queer sensations are frequent in times of danger and excitement, Field reflected. He pondered over the matter until another idea filled his mind.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "I had quite forgotten the Colonel's message. I was to go to Edward street, near the Borough, and wait to see what I should see. I'll just go and hang about there for half an hour or so on the off chance, though I am tired as a dog already. It seems to me that I can't do better than take a cab."

A cab accordingly whirled Inspector Field to the upper end of Edward street, which is by no means a bad type of street for the Borough. The houses are of a respectable class for the most part, the class of houses that let lodgings to medical students and the like.

He was chatting to a policeman on the beat, seeing that he could not loaf there without arousing the suspicions of the intelligent officer on duty, when a couple passed him. The man wore a long fawn overcoat and a silk hat; he was a well-dressed man, as Field could see by his smartly cut trousers and patent leather boots. He had a lady with him, a lady with a handsome wrap. There was a genuine West End air about these people that did not tally at all with Edward street, as Field did not fail to notice.

"Pull those people up and ask them some question," Field whispered to the officer. "I want to get a good look at their faces."

The matter was managed quite easily, though the man in the fawn coat was short and inclined to be curt in his replies. But it sufficed for Field, who expressed no astonishment, as he recognized the features of the man called Reggie, and the woman called "Cora," whom he had seen the night before at No. 100, Audley Place. In other words, he was once more hot upon the scent of Countess de la Moray and General Gastang.

"Very good, indeed, Watson," he said. "That's a bit of luck I hardly expected. I'll just follow these people and make certain. Good night."

Field had not far to go, seeing that the man in the fawn coat produced a latchkey and let himself into a house a little farther down the road. In the drawing-room window there was a card to the effect that lodgings were to be let there.

"It's late, but I'll try it," Field said to himself. "So here goes."

The inspector walked up the steps and rang the bell. After a little time a tall, slatternly woman came to the door and looked sleepily out. She seemed by no means pleased to be disturbed, and the way she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand suggested the fact that she had been taking some of a pleasing and not altogether un-mixing fluid with her supper.

"And what may you want at this time of night?" she asked suspiciously.

"Lodgings," Field said promptly. "I've just come to London, and I find the hotels expensive. I'm prepared to pay an advance—a matter of five and twenty shillings a week or a little more, as it's only for so short a time. You see I am at the hospital."

"Well, if you are at the hospital you'd better stay there," the woman said with a laugh. "We don't let lodgings at this time of night, and besides, I settled with a party today. I'm not go-

ing to stand gossiping here all night. Be off with you."

The door closed, but not before Field had got a glimpse of the inside. The house was most beautifully furnished, as he could see. There was an atmosphere of hothouse flowers and fruit, and the like; a suggestion of exquisite cigars. A man in evening dress, with a diamond flashing in his shirt, crossed the hall; somebody was laughing in a well-bred voice.

"That card about lodgings is a blind," he said. "That place must be watched. I'll get to bed, for I'm dead tired. In the morning I'll go and see my actress friend. Probably she can tell me all about Miss Adela Vane."

It was a little after eleven the next day before Field found time to visit the little actress. He had stupidly forgotten to ask her name, but he seemed to be expected. He waited for some time in a small prettily furnished room till the lady of the last night's adventure came down. She arrived presently, bright and pretty and smiling, her hand outstretched—words of gratitude on her lips.

"But I shall never be able to thank you properly," she said. "The public came very near last night to losing their dear, dear Adela Vane."

"You are Adela Vane?" Field gasped. "Really you are Adela Vane?"

For Adela Vane was the girl who had been closeted the night before with Carl Sartoris.

CHAPTER XXI

TO go back for a space to Berrington. Heedless of his promise, he had burst headlong into the dining-room whence the cry came.

It had been a foolish thing to do, as Berrington realized almost as soon as mind cleared. He had been somewhat badly mauled in the preliminaries, and now it seemed to him that he was a prisoner. The only consolation that was left to him was the fact that Field would come to his rescue in good time.

But Berrington was by no means done by yet.



AS FIELD TURNED TO GO A LITTLE CRY FROM THE STAGE ATTRACTED HIS ATTENTION.

He fell back against the wall, panting for breath; he looked around him again for some avenue of escape, but could see none.

It was a curious scene, altogether, the elegantly furnished room, the litter of glasses and china and crystal in one corner, the mysterious outlined figure on the table. The glare of electric lights shone on the faces of the men there, on the impudent features of the woman who had posed as the Countess de la Moray, and on the pale, supplicating face of Mary Sartoris. For a little time nobody said anything.

It was Mary Sartoris who was the first to speak. She crossed over to her brother and held out her hand with a gesture of supplication.

"It is all a mistake," she cried. "Colonel Berrington imagines that something wrong is taking place here; he has acted on the spur of the moment. He did not come to the house to see anybody but me."

Sartoris grinned in evil fashion. Just for the moment he looked half convinced.

"He comes in strange fashion," he said. "All the same, I have not the least doubt of the value of Colonel Berrington's friendship so far as you are concerned. But that is not the point. Did you admit your friend Colonel Berrington to the house?"

For the fraction of a second a bold lie trembled on Mary's lips. But she could not utter it. She looked down in confusion, and her face trembled. Sartoris grinned in the same wicked fashion. A black rage was rising in his heart.

"Good girl," he sneered. "Always tell the truth. It is the proper thing to do, and it will bring its own reward in the end. Only it is attended with personal inconvenience at times, such as the present, for instance. How did Colonel Berrington get here?"

"I will save your sister the trouble of replying," Berrington cried. "I came here, acting on certain information that had come to my knowledge. I came here to discover if I could learn some facts bearing on the disappearance of Sir Charles Darryll's body. And I am not disposed to think that my efforts are altogether in vain."

It was a bold speech and not without its effect. The woman called Cora turned a shade paler, and the clean-shaven man by her side winked. The only one who seemed disposed to a mild course of policy was Bentwood.

"For heaven's sake don't let us have any violence," he said hoarsely. "There has been too much of that already. I mean there is no necessity for anything of the kind. If Colonel Berrington knows anything of any of us —"

"I know everything," Berrington replied. It

seemed to him that a bold course of action was the best to be taken under the circumstances.

"For instance, I have a pretty accurate knowledge of the checkered past of Dr. Bentwood and the malignant scoundrel who calls himself Carl Sartoris. Of Miss Mary Sartoris I will say nothing. There are others here, too, whose past is not altogether wrapped in mystery. There are General Gastang and Countess de la Moray for instance. And once I am outside these walls —"

Sartoris pushed his chair close to the speaker. He was seething with passionate rage, his face was livid with anger.

"You are not outside these walls," he said. "You are not likely to be outside these walls for some time to come. You have described us in language that you have spared no trouble to render abusive. You know too much. And we have our own way here of dealing with enemies of ours who know too much."

There was no mistaking the dreadful threat that underlay the hoarse speech. Berrington smiled scornfully.

"I know exactly what you mean," he said; "indeed, I know more than you give me credit for. And I will make my suspicions certain."

Berrington advanced swiftly to the table and laid a hand on the sheet that covered the still, silent form there. Another instant, and the whole mystery would have been exposed. But Sartoris propelled his chair forward and grabbed Berrington by the arm.

"You cowards," he yelled. "If I were not cursed by these crippled bones of mine, I would have plucked that fellow's heart from his body. Don't stand there like a lot of mummies. Pull him back, I say, pull him back!"

The harsh, ringing command seemed to restore the other listeners to a sense of what they owed to themselves. With a cry, the man called Reggie was on Berrington, though Mary Sartoris had fallen and clasped him around the knees. With an oath Bentwood darted forward and flung himself upon Berrington's shoulders. The struggle was a hot one, for the Colonel fought well, but the odds were too many for him, and he was borne at length heavily to the ground. His head

in my methods, it stands to reason that I am likely to get the better of you. Now you are a man of honor, and if you give your word it is as good as your bond. Give me your word that not one suggestion of what has taken place here tonight shall be spoken, and you are free to go."

Berrington laughed as he looked around him. "Who is going to stop me?" he asked. "You seem to be sure of your ground. If you were not a cripple I would give you the most perfect specimen of a thrashing that you ever had in your life. My word will be passed to worthier stuff than you."

"So you are going to take advantage of my weakness and walk out of the house?" Sartoris asked.

"That is part of the program," Berrington said. "I feel perfectly sure that a bold front would dismay your friends. I wish you good night."

CHAPTER XXII

SARTORIS sat in his chair without expressing any opinion or emotion of any kind. There was just a faint suggestion of a smile on his face as if he were getting a little more pleasure than usual out of his cigarette. He glanced quite casually in the direction of the doorway, and he moved his chair just a little. Then his left hand stole quietly to his side.

"The battle is not always to the strong," he said in quite a gentle tone of voice. "But since you will not give me your word, I must do without it. If you want to go, there is no reason why I should detain you any longer. Good night, sir, and pleasant dreams to you."

Though the words were uttered in quite a simple fashion, there was a ring about them that Berrington did not altogether like. Why, this sudden change of front on the part of Carl Sartoris? The thought was uppermost in Berrington's mind as he laid a hand on the door.

Then he reeled back as if struck by some stupendous unseen force. A great pain gripped him from head to foot, his brain seemed to be on fire. In vain he strove to release his hand on the door knob; it seemed welded to the metal. From head to foot the shooting agony went on. With his teeth gripping his lower lip till the blood came, Berrington tried to fight down the yell of pain that filled his throat, but the effort was beyond human power. A long piteous wail of agony and entreaty came from him. It was only when the third or fourth cry was torn from him and he set the oppression of a hideous death, that the

thing suddenly ceased and Sartoris's gentle, mocking laughter took the place of the agony.

"You are not feeling very well," Sartoris called out. "If you are not altogether in a state of physical collapse, will you kindly walk this way. A little brandy will about fit the case."

Berrington was past protest and past flight, for the moment. He seemed to be sick to the soul. There came back to him the vivid recollection of the time when he had lain out in the jungle all night, with a bullet through his lungs, waiting wearily for death in the morning. He flung himself exhaustedly into a chair and gasped for breath. Sartoris watched him as some cold-blooded scientist might have watched the flaying of a live animal.

"Your heart is not nearly so bad as you think," he said. "When the pressure goes from your lungs you will be much better. That is a little dodge of mine which is built upon a pretty full knowledge of electricity. Up to now I have not had an opportunity of giving it a good trial. Are you feeling any better?"

Berrington nodded. The color was coming back to his cheeks now, the painful feeling at his chest was abating.

"You malignant little fiend," he gasped. "I should be doing the world a service if I took you by the throat and squeezed the life out of you."

"Well, the remedy is in your hands, though I doubt whether or not a judge and jury would take the same sanguine view of the case. But you are free to try if you like. I am only a mere miserable bag of bones, and you are a strong man. Get to work."

The cackling challenge passed unheeded. Actually there was something about the strange little man to be afraid of. He took up the thread of conversation again.

"You will find that every exit is guarded in the same way," he said. "I have only to set the whole machinery in motion and you are touched. You are in my hands. If you had touched me when I asked you just now, you would have been dead at my feet. But strange as it may seem, I have a heart hidden in this crooked little body of mine somewhere. I was not always bad,

in contact with the brass rail at the back of the chair there came a tremendous blow at the base of the brain, a cold feeling of sudden death, and the crisis was past.

When Berrington came to himself again he was lying on a bed in a small room; there was a lamp on a table by his side. He had no feeling whatsoever, but he had suffered from violence of any kind, he had been clear and bright, his limbs felt as elastic and virile as ever. He was like a man who had suddenly awakened from a long sleep; he was just as fresh and vigorous as the bed on which he was lying completed the illusion.

"What new devil's work is this?" Berrington muttered. "Oh, I recollect."

The room was small but comfortably furnished. There was a fire ready laid in the grate; on the ceiling was a three-branch electric, but the switch by the door had been removed for some reason or other.

On the table by the bed was a very liberal supper, flanked by a decanter of whisky and a siphon of soda water, also a box of cigarettes and another of cigars. A silver match-box invited the prisoner to smoke. He took a cigarette.

Clearly he was a prisoner. The window was shuttered with iron, and a small round ventilator; high up in the door, was another sheet of iron. There was perhaps a little consolation in the fact that no personal violence was intended. For a long time Berrington reviewed the situation. At any rate he could see no way out of the mess for the present. He smoked his cigarette and ate his supper, and that being done, a feeling of fatigue stole over him. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was past one o'clock in the morning, a very late hour for him.

"I'll go to bed," Berrington told himself. "Perhaps I shall be able to see a way out in the morning. On the whole, my diplomacy does not seem much better if I had not hinted that I had taken somebody else into my confidence."

Despite his danger Berrington slept soundly. Bright sunshine was pouring into the room through the little porthole in the iron shutter as he came to himself. By his side was a cold breakfast, with a spirit lamp for the purpose of making coffee. Berrington had hardly finished and applied a match to a cigarette before he was startled by the scream of a whistle. His heart gave a great leap as it occurred to the prisoner that perhaps Mary Sartoris was calling him. He crossed over and pulled out the whistle at his end and answered promptly.

"Glad to hear that you have had a good night's rest," came the dry voice of Sartoris. "The bed is comfortable, and I can vouch for the quality of the cigars. By the way, as I have seen nothing of your confederate I am confirmed in my previous judgment that you were trying to bluff me. Is not that so?"

Berrington said nothing, silence giving consent. On the whole it occurred to him it would be far better to let Sartoris conclude that he was alone in the business.

"Very good," the dry voice went on; "you are like the curly-headed boy in the song who never hardly ever—told a lie. Now there is one little thing that I am going to ask you to do. And if you refuse, I shall be under the painful necessity of causing you a great deal of physical suffering. On the table by the side of your bed you will find writing paper, pen and ink. You will be so good as to write a letter to Miss Beatrice Darryll or to Mrs. Richard—whatever you prefer to style her—asking her to call upon you at the address which is stamped on the head of the paper. You are to tell Miss Darryll that she is not to say anything to anybody about the visit—that she is to come at ten o'clock tonight or later. Tell her also that she is to bring the little bunch of keys that she will find in her father's dressing-case. You may take it from me that no harm whatever is intended to the young lady. When the letter is finished you will be so good as to push it under the door of your room."

"It is an excellent program for you," Berrington said drily. "There is only one flaw in the little arrangement that I can see—I decline to do anything of the kind. You may do whatever you like and treat me in any way you please, but I shall decline to write that letter. And you may whistle up the tube all day, so far as I am concerned."

An oath came up the tube, then the voice of Sartoris, as if talking to somebody else. The whistle was clapped on, but almost immediately it was removed and another voice whispered the name of Berrington. His heart gave a great leap. Mary was speaking.

"For heaven's sake, write that letter," came the agonized whisper. "I pledge you my word—"

The voice stopped and the whistle was clapped into the tube again.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE request was a strange one, Berrington thought. Not that he failed to trust Mary Sartoris. The more Berrington thought of it, the more puzzled he became. If he declined to write that letter it might be possibly prove harmful to Beatrice.

Very thoughtfully Berrington took paper and pen and ink from the drawer in the table. He was not surprised to see that the paper bore the address "100, Audley Place." So Beatrice was to be lured there for some reason, or other, and Berrington was to be used for the purpose. He threw the pen down and determined that he would do nothing in the matter. He had barely come to this conclusion when the whistle in the tube sounded very faintly. It might have been no more than the wind in the pipe, and yet on the other hand it might have been meant for a cautious message. Berrington crossed over and asked a question in a low voice. Immediately a reply came in the faintest possible whisper.

"It is I who speak," the voice said. "You know, by accident I know your words with you again. I am in ignorance of everything that you had left the house to do. At the same time the servants back yet, and you can hear me."

"My dearest girl," Berrington replied, "how do you get on? Can you speak for a minute or two more. Carl has gone in something; he may be told me that you had gone for a minute, so I wait. I found out that you were found out about the letter."

"The letter to Beatrice," she said. "Yes, yes, because I get her here. Don't ask me. But there is something to do with Miss Violet Decie's father. Shall we ever get to the bottom of this?"

"Because I shall be able to tell you," Berrington said. "I shall be able to tell you."

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