The Crimson Blind

By Fred M. White

CHAPTER IV.
In Extremis.

For some time—a minute, an hour—Steel stood over the dreadful thing huddled upon the floor of his conservatory. Just then he was incapable of consecutive ideas.

His mind began to move at length. The more he thought of it the more absolutely certain he was that he fastened the door before leaving the house. True, the latch-key was only an ordinary one, and a key might easily have been made to fit it. As a matter of fact, David had two, one in reserve in case of accidents. The other was usually kept in a jewel drawer of the dressing table. Perhaps—

David went quietly up stairs. It was just possible that the murderer was in the house. But the closest search revealed nothing. He pulled out the jewel drawer in the dressing table. The spare latch key was gone. Here was something to go upon.

Then there was a rumbling of an electric bell somewhere that set David's heart beating like a drum. The hall light streamed upon a policeman in uniform, and an inspector in a dark overcoat and a hard felt hat. On the pavement was a long, shallow tray, which David recognized, mechanically, as an ambulance.

"Something very serious, sir?" Inspector Marley asked, quietly. "I've brought the doctor with me."

David nodded. Both the inspector and the doctor were acquaintances of his. He closed the door and led the way into the study. Just inside the conservatory, and not far from the huddled figure, lay David's cigar case. Doubtless, without knowing it, the owner had whisked it off the table when he had sprung the telephone.

"'Um!" Marley muttered. "Is this a clue, or yours, sir?"

He lifted the case, with its diamonds gleaming like stars on a dark night. David had forgotten all about it for the time, had forgotten where it came from or that it contained £250 in bank notes.

"Not mine," he said. "I mean to say, of course, it is mine. A recent present. The shock of this discovery has deprived me of my senses pretty well."

Marley laid the cigar case on the table. It seemed strange to him, who could follow a tragedy calmly, that a man should forget his own property. Meanwhile, Cross was bending over the body. David could see a face, smooth, like that of a woman. A quick little exclamation came from the doctor.

"A drop of brandy here, and quick as possible," he commanded.

"You don't mean to say," Steel began; "you don't —"

—Cross waved his arm impatiently. The brandy was procured as soon as possible. Steel, watching intently, fancied that he detected a slight flicker of the muscles of the white, stark face.

"Bring the ambulance here," Cross said, curtly. "If we can get this poor chap to the hospital there is just a chance for him. Fortunately, we have not many yards to go."

As far as elucidation went, Marley naturally looked to Steel.

"I should like to have your explanation, sir," he said, gravely.

"Positively, I have no explanation to offer," David replied. "About midnight I let myself out to go for a stroll, carefully closing the door behind me. Naturally, the door was on the latch. When I came back, an hour or so later, to my horror and surprise, I found those marks of a struggle yonder, and that poor fellow lying on the floor of the conservatory."

"'Um. Was the door fast on your return?"

"No; it was pulled to, but it was open, all the same."

"You didn't happen to lose your latch key during your midnight stroll, sir?"

"No; it was only when I put my key in the door that I discovered it to be open. I have a spare latch key that I keep for emergencies, but when I went to look for it just now, the key was not to be found. When I came back the house was perfectly quiet."

"What family have you, sir, and what kind of servants?"

"There is only myself and my mother, with three maids. You may dismiss any suspicion of the servants from your mind at once. My mother trained them all in the old vicarage where I was born, and not one of the trio has been with us less than twelve years."

"That simplifies matters somewhat," said Marley, thoughtfully. "Apparently your latch key was stolen by somebody who has made a careful study of your habits. Do you generally go for late walks after your household has gone to bed, sir?"

David replied, somewhat grudgingly, that he had never done such a thing before. He would like to have concealed the fact, but it was bound to come out, sooner or later. He had strolled along the front and round Brunswick Square. Marley shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it's a bit of a puzzle to me," he admitted. "You go out for a midnight walk—a thing you have never done before—and when you come back you find somebody has got into your house by means of a stolen latch-key and murdered somebody else in your conservatory. According to that, two people must have entered the house."

"That's logic," David admitted. There can be no murder without the slain and the slayer. My impression is that somebody who knows the ways of the house watched me depart. . . Then he lured his victim in here, under pretence that it was his own house—he had the purloined latch key—and murdered him. Audacious, but a far safer way than doing it out of doors."

But Marley's imagination refused to go so far. The theory was plausible enough, he pointed out, respectfully, if the assassin had been assured that the midnight rambles were a matter of custom. The point was a shrewd one, and Steel had to admit it. He almost wished now that he had suggested that he often took these midnight rambles. He regretted the fiction still more when Marley asked him if he had some appointment elsewhere to-night.

"No," David said, promptly, "I hadn't."

He prevaricated without hesitation. His adventure in Brunswick Square could not possibly have anything to do with the tragedy, and nothing would be gained by betraying that trust.

"I'll run around to the hospital and come and see you again in the morning, sir," Marley said. "Whatever was the motive of the crime, it wasn't robbery, or the criminal wouldn't have left that cigar case of yours behind. Sir James Lythem had one stolen like that at the last races, and he valued it at £80."

"I'll come so far as the hospital with you," said Steel.

At the bottom of the flight of steps they encountered Dr. Cross and the policeman. The former handed over to Marley a pocket book and some papers, together with a watch and chain.

"Everything that we could find upon him," he explained.

"Is the poor fellow dead yet?" David asked.

"No," Cross replied. "He was stabbed twice in the back, in the region of the liver. I could not say for sure, but there is just a chance that he may recover. But one thing is pretty certain—it will be a good, long time before he is in a position to say anything for himself. Good-night, Mr. Steel."

David went indoors thoughtfully, with a general feeling that something like a hand had grasped his brain and was squeezing it like a sponge. He was free from his carking anxiety now, but it seemed to him that he was paying a heavy price for his liberty. Mechanically he counted out the bank notes, and almost as mechanically he cut his initials on the gun metal inside the cigar case. He was one of the kind of men who like to have their initials everywhere.

He snapped the lights out and went to bed at last. But not to sleep. The welcome dawn came at last, and David took his bath gratefully. He would have to tell his mother what had happened, suppressing all reference to the Brunswick Square episode. It was not a pleasant story, but Mrs. Steel assimilated it at length over her early tea and toast.

"It might have been you, my dear," she said, placidly. "And, indeed, it is a dreadful business. But why not telephone to the hospital and ask how the poor fellow is?"

The patient was better, but was still in an unconscious condition.

CHAPTER V.
"Received With Thanks."

Steel swallowed a hasty breakfast and hurried townwards. He had £1,000 packed away in his cigar case, and the sooner he was free from Beckstein the better he would be pleased. He came at length to the offices of Messrs. Mossa & Mack, whose brass plate bore the legend that the gentry in question were solicitors, and that they also had a business in London. As David strode into the offices of the senior partner, that individual looked up with a shade of anxiety in his deep, Oriental eyes.

"If you have come to offer terms," he said, nasally, "I am sorry—"

"To hear that I have come to pay you in full," David said, grimly; "974 16s. 4d. every penny you can rightfully claim, up to yesterday, which, I understand is Here it is. Count it."

He opened the cigar case and took the notes therefrom. Mr. Mossa counted them, very carefully, indeed. The shade of disappointment was still upon his aquiline features. He had hoped to put in an execution to-day and sell David up. In that way quite £200 might have been added to his legitimate earnings.

"It appears to be all correct," Mossa said, dismally.

"So I imagined, sir. You will be so good as to indorse the receipt on the back of the writ. Of course, you are delighted to find that I am not putting you painful extremities. Any other firm of solicitors would have given me time to pay this. But I am like the man who journeyed from Jericho to Jerusalem:—"

"And fell among thieves? You dare to call me a thief? You dare—"

"I didn't," David said, drily. "That fine, discriminating mind of yours saved me the trouble. I have met some tolerably slimy scoundrels in my time, but never any of them more despicable than yourself. Faugh! The mere sight of you sickens me. Let me get out of the place so that I can breathe!"

David strode out of the office with the remains of his small fortune rammed into his pocket. In the wild, unreasoning rage that came over him, he had forgotten his cigar case. And it was some little time before Mr. Mossa was calm enough to see the diamonds winking at him.

"Our friend is in funds," he muttered. "Well, he shall have a dance for his cigar case. I'll send it up to the police station and say that some gentleman or other left it here by accident. And if that Steel comes back, we can say that there is no cigar case here. And if Steel does not see the police advertisement he will lose his pretty toy, and serve him right. Yes; that is the way to serve him out!"

Mossa proceeded to put his scheme into execution while David was strolling along the sea front. He was too excited for work, though he felt easier in his mind than he had for months. He turned, mechanically on to the Palace Pier, at the head of which an Eastbourne steamer was blaring and panting. The trip appealed to David in his present frame of mind. Like most of his class, he was given to acting on the spur of the moment. . . . It was getting dark as David let himself into Downend Terrace with his latch-key.

How good it was to be back again! The eye of the artist rested fondly on the beautiful things around. And, but for the sport of chance, the whim of fate, those had all passed from him by this time. It was good to look across the dining table over Venetian glass, to see the pools of light cast by the shaded electric, to note the feathery fall of flowers, and to see that placid, gentle face in its frame of white hair opposite him. Mrs. Steel's simple, unaffected pride in her son was not the least gratifying part of David's success.

"You have not suffered from the shock, mother?" he asked.

"Well, no," Mrs Steel confessed, placidly. "You see, I never had what people call nerves, my dear. And, after all, I saw nothing. Still, I am very sorry for that poor young man, and I have sent to inquire after him several times."

"He is no worse, or I should have heard of it."

"No; and no better. And Inspector Marley has been here to see you twice to-day."

David pitied himself as much as a man could pity himself considering his surroundings. It was rather annoying that this should have happened at a time when he was so busy. And Marley would have all sorts of questions to ask at all sorts of inconvenient seasons.

Steel passed into his study presently and lighted a cigarette. Despite his determination to put the events of yesterday from his mind, he found himself constantly returning to them. What a splendid dramatic story that would make! And what a fascinating mystery could be woven round that gun metal cigar case!

By the way, where was the cigar case? On the whole, it would be just as well to lock the cigar case away till he could discover some reasonable excuse for its possession. His mother would be pretty sure to ask where it came from, and David could not prevaricate, so far as she was concerned. But the cigar case was not to be found, and David was forced to the conclusion that he ad left it in Mossa's office.

A little annoyed with himself, he took up the evening Argus. There was half a column devoted to the strange case at Downend Terrace, and just over it a little advertisement to the effect that a gun metal cigar case had been found, and was in the hands of the police awaiting an owner.

David slipped from the house and caught a 'bus in St. George's Road.

At the police station he learned that Inspector Marley was still on the premises. Marley came forward gravely. He had a few questions to ask, but nothing to tell.

"And now perhaps you can give me some information?" David said. "You are advertising in to-night's Argus a gun metal cigar case set with diamonds."

"Ah!" Marley said, eagerly, "can you tell us anything about it?"

"Nothing beyond the fact that I hope to satisfy you that the case is mine."

Marley stared, open-mouthed at David for a moment, and then relapsed into his sapless official manner. He might have been a detective cross-examining a suspected criminal.

"Why this mystery?" David asked. "I have lost a gun metal cigar case set with diamonds, and I see a similar article is noted as found by the police. I lost it this morning, and I shrewdly suspect that I left it behind me at the office of Mr. Mossa."

"The case was sent here by Mr. Mossa himself," Marley admitted.

"Then, of course, it is mine. I had to give Mr. Mossa my opinion of him this morning, and, by way of spiting me, he sent that case here, hoping, perhaps, that I should not recover it. You know the case, Marley—it was lying on the floor of my conservatory that night."

"I did notice a gun metal case there," Marley replied.

"As a matter of fact, you called my attention to it, and asked if it was mine."

"And you said at first that it wasn't, sir."

"Well, you must make allowances for my then frame of mind," David laughed. "I rather gather, from your manner, that somebody else has been after the case; if that is so, you are right to be reticent. Still, it is in your hands, to settle the matter on the spot. All you have to do is to open the case, and if you fail to find my initials, "D. S.," scratched in the left-hand top corner, then I have lost my property, and the other fellow has found his."

In the same reticent fashion, Marley proceeded to unlock a safe in the corner, and from thence he produced what appeared to be the identical cause of all this talk. He pulled the electric table lamp over to him and proceeded to examine the inside carefully.

"You are quite right," he said, at length. "Your initials are here."

"Not strange, seeing that I scratched them there last night," said David, drily. "When? Oh, it was after you left my house last night."

"And it has been some time in your possession, sir?"

"Oh, confound it, no. It was—well, it was a present from a friend for a little service rendered. So far as I understand, it was purchased at Lockhart's, in North street. No, I'll be hanged if I answer any more of your questions, Marley. I'll be your Aunt Sally as far as you are officially concerned. But, as to yonder case, your queries are distinctly impertinent."

Marley shook his head gravely, as one might over a promising but headstrong boy.

"Do I understand that you decline to account for the case?" he asked.

"Certainly I do. It is connected with some friend of mine, to whom I rendered a service a little time back. The whole thing is and must remain an absolute secret."

"You are placing yourself in a very delicate position, Mr. Steel."

David started at the gravity of the tone. That something was radically wrong came upon him like a shock. And he could see pretty clearly that, without betraying confidence, he could not logically account for the presence of the cigar case. In any case, it was too much to expect that the stolid police officer would listen to so extravagant a tale for a moment.

"What on earth do you mean, man?" he cried.

"Well, it's this way," Marley proceeded to explain: "When I pointed out the case to you, lying on the floor of the conservatory last night, you said it wasn't yours. You looked at it with the eyes of a stranger, and then you said you were mistaken. From information given me last night I have been making inquiries about the cigar case. You took it to Mr. Mossa's, and from it you produced notes to the value of nearly £1,000 to pay off a debt. Within eight-and-forty hours you had no more prospect of paying that debt than I have at this moment. Of course, you will be able to account for those notes. You can, of course?"

Marley looked eagerly, at his visitor. A cold chill was playing up and down Steel's spine. Not, to save his life, could he account for those notes.

"We will discuss that when the proper time comes," he said, with fine indifference.

'As you please, sir. From information also received, I took the case to Wallen's, in West street, and asked Mr. Wallen if he had seen the case before. Pressed to identify it, he handed me a glass and asked me to find the figures (say) '1771.x.3,' in tiny characters on the edge. I did so, by the aid of the glass, and Mr. Whalen further proceeded to show me an entry in his purchasing ledger, which proved that the cigar case in gun metal and diamonds bearing that legend had been added to the stock quite recently—a few weeks ago, in fact."

"Well, what of that?" David asked, impatiently. "For all I know, the case might have come from Walen's. I said it came from a friend, who must needs be nameless, for services equally nameless. I am not going to deny that Wallen was right."

(To Be Continued.)

Four-Cent Tax on Novels.

The proposed municipal tax of 4 cents a volume on fiction is likely to be adopted if the newspapers have canvassed the members of the council correctly.

John Labusquire, the only American-born Paris alderman in history, is the author of the measure. He says:

"My purpose is not anti-educational. Nobody has worked harder than myself in behalf of public libraries. But the truth is, few novels really are educational.

"Novel-reading is merely one way of intoxicating one's self—like opium, whisky or wine. If we tax beer, why not fiction? We tax many essentials of life, why not this demoralizing consumption of romance?

"My bill exempts histories, scientific books and all the classics."—Paris Cable to New York World.

The Wrong Connection.

The telephone girl and the bill clerk, to whom she had promised her heart and hand, were sitting in front of the fire place, talking about the happy days to come when they should be one.

From one little detail to another, the talk finally drifted to the subject of lighting the fires in the morning. On this point the young man was decided. He stated it as his emphatic opinion that it was a wife's duty to get up and start the fires, and let her poor, hard-worked husband rest.

After this decision there was a silence for about three-quarters of a second. Then the telephone girl thrust out the finger encircled by her engagement ring and murmured, sweetly but firmly:

"Ring off, please. You have got connection with the wrong number."—New York Times.

Perfection.

The sense of importance which little Clara felt on being promoted to the public school, after two years of lessons at her grandmother's knee, was much enhanced when the time came for her written examination. She studied faithfully the twenty pages in her spelling book covered in the review, and when her paper was returned had the delight of seeing that it was graded 100.

The little girl at once wrote to her father the news of her success.

"Dear papa," the little note ran. "I did not miss a single word in my examiation. I am now purface in spelling."—Harper's Magazine.

The Minister's Wonderment.

The Rev. Dr. Bitting, pastor of the Mount Morris Baptist church, is a Southerner, and is noted among the many who have had the pleasure of hearing him speak for his original as well as his humorous remarks. The other Sunday evening, as he was announcing the offertory, and while soliciting a generous collection, he said:

"When I look over an audience, such as this, I say to myself: Where are the poor? But, more often, when I gaze at the contribution boxes, I wonder, Where are the rich?"—New York Times.

Nervousness Gave His Words a Twist.

Everything was in readiness. The groom, best man and the minister were gathered in the vestry. The organist began to play and the minister started for the door.

"Wait a moment, doctor!" called the nervous groom. "Is it the right or left hand that the ring goes on?"

"The left," hurriedly replied the minister.

"And, doctor, is—is it kisstermary to cuss the bride?"—Philadelphia Times.

Possibilities of the Latest Craze.

Housemaid (entering hurriedly)—Oh, if you please, mum, you know when you allowed cook to go out, just now for an hour? Well, she's come back so very—er—(hesitatingly)—poorly?

Mistress—So very poorly? Good gracious, Jane, what is the matter?

Housemaid—Well, you know, mum, you told her to do them bantam's eggs for master's tea, and she's trying to boil the ping-pong balls!—Punch.

What's in a Name?

"How full of misnomers our language is," said Mrs. Brown. "I met a man yesterday who was a regular bear, and yet they said he was a 'civil' engineer."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Lamb, "and there is the 'teller' in the bank. I asked him how much my husband had there and he wouldn't tell me at all."—Philadelphia Press.

At Both Ends.

Jasper—The British government is having a tough time of it just now.

Jumpuppe—I should say so. Their failures are scored by Kipling and their successes praised by Austin.—Life.

N. D. N. U —NO 18.— 1902.

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