A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER II.—(Continued).

Although I opened my eyes, all was, of course, an utter blank before me. Yet I felt instinctively, as every blind person does, the presence of some one in my immediate vicinity, and presently after long reflection, I suddenly asked—

"Where am I? What has happened?"

"You have been run over, and your head is injured," answered a strange harsh voice, hoarse and altogether curious. "But tell me. Your eyes have a curious look in them. Can't you see?"

"No," I responded. "Unfortunately, I am totally blind."

"Blind!" gasped the voice, in apparent amazement. "Then that accounts for your accident!"

"But where am I?" I inquired eagerly.

"You need not trouble, I assure you," answered the voice, pleasantly. "You are with friends."

"Then I am not in a hospital?"

"Certainly not. Having witnessed your accident, I am trying to do what little I can for you."

The voice, a man's, was low-pitched; and, further, it struck me as being disguised.

"May I not know the name of my good Samaritan?" I inquired.

"The name is entirely unnecessary," the voice responded. "From your card-case I see that your name is Heaton, and that you live in Essex Street Strand."

"Yes," I answered. It was evident, then, that whoever was this person who had taken compassion upon me in my helplessness, he had already been through my pockets.

"How long have you been blind?" the voice inquired, hoarse and deep. I knew that it was disguised by certain of the syllables being pronounced differently in various words. My hearing had fortunately returned to me again, and those who are blind are quick to detect any unusual sound, however slight it may be.

"For a year or more," I answered.

"And does your head still pain you very much?" inquired the voice, while at the same moment I felt a cool hand placed upon my throbbing brow.

In an instant I seized it by the wrist. The hand tried to wrench itself free, but not before I had felt the slimness of the fingers, the rings upon them, and the softness of the palm.

It was a woman's. She had cleverly disguised her voice to cause me to believe that it was a man's. I placed my right hand upon her arm and felt it bare. Upon her wrist was a curious bracelet, thin but strangely pliable, evidently made of some ingeniously worked and twisted wire. I could not recollect ever having seen such a bangle upon a woman's wrist before.

The arm was bare; her skirts were of silk. My nurse was evidently in an evening toilette.

"Although I cannot see you, madam, I thank you for your kind attention," I said, a trifle piqued that she should have endeavored to mislead me by her voice.

She drew her hand away quickly, with a slight cry, as though annoyed at my discovery.

"I witnessed your accident," she explained simply, in a sweet, well-modulated voice, evidently her own. By her tone, she was no doubt young, and I wondered whether she was pretty. Truly this evening adventure of mine was a curious one.

"How did it happen? Tell me," I urged.

"You were crossing the road, and were knocked down by a cab. My doctor has already examined you, and says that you are not seriously hurt. It is a mere scalp-wound, therefore you may rest content, and congratulate yourself upon a very narrow escape."

"I congratulate myself upon falling into the hands of a friend," I said.

"Oh, it is really nothing!" exclaimed the voice of my unknown hostess with an educated accent. "In a few hours you will, no doubt, be all right. Rest, and in the morning the carriage shall take you home."

"Then it is not yet morning?" I inquired, vaguely wondering what hour it might be.

"No, not yet."

The response sounded afar off, and I felt somehow that my strength was suddenly failing me. A heavy, drowsy feeling crept over me, and my mind seemed filled with conflicting thoughts, until suddenly, and quite unconsciously, I fell asleep, the cool, soft, sympathetic hand still upon my brow.

When I awoke it was with a refreshed feeling. No one was, however, in my immediate vicinity. My kind protectress had left me, yet I heard voices in conversation in the adjoining room. The door communicating was closed, but there was the unmistakable pop of a champagne-cork and a jingling of thin glasses that told of festivity. 'n whose house, I wondered, was I a guest? Already I had inquired, but had been refused information.

Suddenly the voices were hushed, and I could distinguish a woman saying—

"I tell you he's blind—stone-blind. If you doubt me, hold that before his face and see if he flinches."

A man's voice sounded in a low growl in response, then all was silent. Only the ticking of a clock somewhere near broke the stillness.

Whispers, like low, suspicious exchanges of confidence, soon afterwards reached my ears. The door had opened silently, and a few seconds later I felt the soft hand of my protectress again upon my forehead. My sightless eyes were wide open, and by that she, of course, knew that I was awake.

"Are you better after your sleep?" the well-cultivated voice inquired concernedly.

"Very much," I answered, raising myself upon my elbow. "But I have troubled you far too long, and will go, if you will kindly instruct your servant to call me a cab."

"Oh dear no," the voice answered pleasantly. "I couldn't think of allowing you to go home at this hour, and in your weak state, too. It would be madness. Continue your rest, and you will be quite right again in the morning."

"You are extremely kind," I protested, "but I really couldn't think of remaining longer."

"Would you like to repay me for what you so very generously term kindness?" she asked. "If so, I would only ask one little favor."

"Certainly. I will grant it if it lies within my power," I responded.

"Well, it is that you would scribble your name here, in this birthday book of mine. It will be a little souvenir of this evening."

"But I cannot write well now-a-days. I can't see, you know," I protested.

"But you can write your signature. If the handwriting is uneven I will forgive you, in the circumstances," the voice said merrily; and a moment later she placed a pen with a handle of ivory or pearl within my hand.

"What day of the month?" inquired the sweet voice.

"The second of July," I answered, laughing; and my unknown friend, having opened the book at that page, guided my hand to the paper, whereon I scrawled my name.

She took both pen and book, and by the departing swish of her skirts I knew that she had left me and had passed into the adjoining room.

A strange picture arose in my mind. Was she beautiful? At any rate her surroundings were elegant, and her low musical voice was that of a young and refined girl of twenty or so.

I listened, lying there helpless and sorely puzzled. Again curious whisperings in subdued tones sounded from beyond, but almost at that same moment some one commenced to play upon the piano Chopin's "Andante Spinato," which prevented me from distinguishing either the words uttered or the trend of the discussion.

For several minutes the sound of the piano filled the room, the touch, light and delicate, seeming to be that of a woman, when, of a sudden, there was a loud smashing of glass, and a woman's shrill, piercing scream rang out, accompanied by the sound of some heavy object as it fell to the floor.

In an instant the music ceased, and at the same moment I heard a man's voice cry wildly—

"Good God! You've—why you've killed her."

Next second there sounded a rapid scuffling of feet, a chair was overturned and broken, and from the quick panting and muttered ejaculations it seemed as though two persons were closed in deadly embrace. In their frantic, desperate struggle they advanced into the room where I was, and I, still utterly helpless, with only a dark void about me, raised myself in horror and alarm. The man's words held me appalled.

Some terrible tragedy had occurred. My kind protectress had been murdered.

The other two persons, whoever they were, fought fiercely quite close to me, and I could distinctly detect from the vain efforts to shout made by the weaker that the stronger held him by the throat, and was endeavoring to strangle him.

Of a sudden there was a quick, dull thud, the unmistakable sound of a heavy blow, followed by a short agonized cry.

"Ah-h!" shrieked the voice of the person struck; and at the same instant a great weight fell back inertly upon me as I was lying, nearly crushing the breath from me.

I passed my sensitive hands over it quickly. It was the body of a man. Blood ran warm over my fingers.

He had been stabbed to the heart.

CHAPTER III.

The weight of the inert body oppressed me, and in striving to extricate myself it slipped from the couch and slid to the ground.

I raised myself quickly, not knowing whether next moment I, too, might be struck down.

The faint sound of some one moving stealthily across the thick-pile carpet caused me to sit rigid, holding my breath. I heard the movement distinctly, and curiously enough it sounded as though it were a woman, for there was just a faint rustling as though her skirts trailed upon the ground. My quick ear told me that the person was approaching. By the panting breath I knew that it was the assassin.

Was I, too, to fall a victim?

I tried to call out, but in that moment of agony and horror my tongue refused to articulate. It seemed to cleave to the roof of my mouth.

The sound of movement ceased, and I knew that the person was quite close to me. My eyes were wide open, held fixed in expectant horror.

I felt a warm breath upon my cheeks, and knew that the unknown assassin was peering into my eyes. Next moment I had an instinctive feeling of something being held a few inches from my face.

In an instant the words that had been spoken by my protectress recurred to me. She had declared to her companions that I was blind, and urged them to test me by holding something to my head.

This was now being done. The truth of my statement was being proved, possibly by a revolver being held to my brow. If so, my only chance of safety rested in unflinching coolness. My position was certainly a most unenviable one.

For a few moments the panting heart of the assassin thumped close to me; then, apparently satisfied, the unknown person moved off in silence without uttering a single word.

My first impulse was to jump up and arrest the progress of the assassin, but on reflection I saw that to do so would only be to invite death. What could I do, blind as I was?

Only could I sit and listen, trying to distinguish every detail of the mystery.

Yes, I became convinced more than ever that the person leaving the room was not a man—but a woman.

Could it be the same individual whose cool, sympathetic hand had only a quarter of an hour before soothed my brow? The thought held me dumbfounded.

I had all along believed that the assassin had been a man, but it was certain by the swish of silken flounces that it was a woman.

As I listened I heard the click of an electric-light switch at the door of the room, and a couple of minutes later a heavy door closed. From the bang of the knocker I knew that the street-door had been shut by some person who had left the house.

I still sat listening. All was silent. Only the low ticking of the clock broke the dead stillness of the night. The mysterious woman who had thus made her exit had evidently switched off the light, leaving me in total darkness with the hideous evidences of her crime.

For some short time longer I listened, my ears open to catch every sound, but hearing nothing, I now knew that I was alone. Therefore, rising to my feet, I groped about until my hands touched the prostrate body of the man, and as I did so he heaved a long sigh, and a quick shudder ran through his frame. The wound had evidently not caused instant death, but, placing my hand quickly over the heart, I found that it had now ceased its beating with the final spasm.

Slowly, and with utmost care, I passed both my hands over the dead man's face in order to obtain some mental picture of his appearance. His hair seemed thick and well parted at the side, his features those of a young man shaven save for the moustache, which was long and well trained. He was in evening clothes, and wore in his shirt a single stud, which, to my touch, seemed of very peculiar shape. I tried to make out its design, but in vain, when suddenly I remembered that if I took it, it might afterwards give me some clue to its dead owner's identity. So I took it from the stiff shirt-front and placed it in the pocket of my vest.

His watch-chain was an ordinary curb, I found, with a watch which had the greasy feel of silver. In his pockets were a couple of sovereigns and some loose silver, but no letters nor card-case, nothing indeed to lead me to a knowledge of who he really was. In one pocket I found a small pencil-case, and this I also took for my own purposes.

Half a dozen times I placed my hand upon his heart, whence the blood was slowly oozing, but there was no movement. The blow had been aimed with such terrible precision that he had been struck down ere he could utter a single word.

My investigations showed that he was about twenty-eight years of age; probably fair, by the softness of the hair and moustache, with even teeth, rather sharp jaw-bones and cheeks a trifle thin. Having ascertained this much, I groped forward with both hands in the direction of the room wherein the woman had been so swiftly done to death. It was in darkness, I have no doubt, but to me darkness was of no account, for I was ever in eternal gloom. The furniture over which I stumbled here and there was covered with silk brocade, the woodwork being of that smoothness which had led me to believe that it must be gilded. It was without doubt a fine spacious drawing-room where I had been lying, for the dimensions of the place were quite unusual, and the objects with which my hand came into contact were always of character magnificent, and in keeping with the grandeur of the place. The house was evidently one of those fine mansions with which the West End of London abounds, and certainly this apartment, even though I could not see it, was the acme of comfort and luxury.

(To be Continued.)

Thirty-Eighth Annual Report

TO JANUARY 1st, 1908, OF THE

Mutual Life of Canada

HEAD OFFICE, - WATERLOO, ONT.

CASH ACCOUNT

INCOME.		
NET LEDGER ASSETS, December 31st, 1906		$ 9,890,477.70
PREMIUMS:		
First year	$ 230,636.63	
Renewals	1,519,322.77	
Annuity	3,450.00	
	$1,753,409.40	
Less Re-assurance	20,367.52	
		1,733,041.88
INTEREST		509,240.02
PROFIT AND LOSS		1,288.25
		$12,134,047.85

DISBURSEMENTS.		
TO POLICYHOLDERS:		
Death Claims	$317,776.50	
Matured Endowments	178,785.00	
Surrendered Policies	92,138.68	
Surplus	80,805.19	
Annuities	10,714.93	
		$ 680,220.30
EXPENSES, TAXES, ETC		383,981.33
BALANCE NET LEDGER ASSETS, December 31st, 1907		11,069,846.22
		$12,134,047.85

BALANCE SHEET

ASSETS.	
Mortgages	$5,756,070.85
Debentures and Bonds	3,593,965.84
Loans on Policies	1,410,130.87
Premium Obligations	22,534.21
Real Estate (Company's Head Office)	30,875.79
Cash in Banks	280,494.29
Cash at Head Office	1,505.19
Due and deferred premiums, (net)	319,277.97
Interest due and accrued	241,554.91
	$11,656,409.92

LIABILITIES.	
Reserve, 4p.c., 3½p.c. and 3p.c. standard	$10,019,563.89
Reserve on lapsed policies on which surrender values are claimable.	4,171.22
Death Claims unadjusted	39,350.00
Present value of death claims payable in instalments	38,506.93
Matured Endowments, unadjusted	1,693.45
Premiums paid in advance	12,737.18
Due for medical fees and sundry accounts	10,936.75
Credit Ledger Balances	25,730.82
Surplus, December 31st, 1907	1,503,719.68
(Surplus on Government Standard of Valuation $1,897,358.28.)	
	$11,656,409.92

Audited and found correct.

J. M. SCULLY, F.C.A., Auditor

GEO. WEGENAST, Managing Director.

Waterloo, January 29th, 1908.

New Business written (gain over 1906, $1,577,855) - - - **$7,081,402**

Insurance in force (gain over 1906, $4,179,440) - - - - **$51,091,848**

Surplus (gain over 1906, $300,341) - - - - - - **$1,503,719**

Booklets containing full report of the Annual Report, held March 5th 1908, are being published and will be distributed among Policyholders in due course.

WOULD SUIT HIM EXACTLY.

Mr. Hewligus—Yes, I want a boy to take care of my horses, run errands, and do any other kind of work that's needed on the premises. Have you a recommendation from your last employer?

Applicant (for job)—Yes, sir. The last man I worked for was old Hunks. He says I ain't worth powder enough to blow me up.

Mr. Hewligus—I'll take you.

STRICTLY LOGICAL.

"I guess the business of putting new covers on old books is one which has never more than a temporary depression."

"What makes you think that?"

"Isn't it naturally on the rebound."

Muggins—"I am surprised that you believe the story Brown just told us. Why, I wouldn't believe it if I told it myself." Huggins—"Oh, well, in that case neither would I."