

HER BARE FOOT.

By WILLIAM C. HUDSON.



REMEMBER! Her bare foot! These words were whispered into my ear one night last winter as, at the close of a performance, I was pressing through the lobby of the Empire Theatre in New York. Startled, I impulsively turned to the

burning hall light I examined it; on it was written in a hand with which I was not familiar:

"Remember! Her bare foot! Be prepared!"

I was shocked. Hurrying to my room. I studied the slip.

The writing was that of a man of education and of one accustomed to the use of the pen—this the slip indicated and nothing more, except that it proved that the whisper in the theatre lobby

"What does it mean?" he asked. "That's what I want to know," I replied.

I told him the story of the previous evening. Chester is a cheerful and optimistic youth.

"Poh!" he said, with a waive of the hand, dismissing the whole matter. "Some of your friends are constructing an elaborate joke."

Then he drove the matter from my mind by a proposition well according with my fancy. He had received an extensive order for a series of views in another State, and he proposed that in his absence, a fortnight or more, I should conduct his studio.

"I doubt if you will have much to do," he said. "The damsel who wants to be 'took beautiful' is not much in evidence here. If she does put in an appearance you will have a chance to spoil some plates and exploit your theories on the art of posing."

I yielded without urging, and as we parted at evening he said:

"I don't know that I have anything to say, except to advise you to sit on that boy of mine every ten minutes—for your own sake, you know—and to beware of the fascinations of the young 'saleslady' who has dubbed herself the 'cashier' of the establishment."

On my way home I stopped at the tobacconist's where I buy my cigars.

"A boy left this for you, Mr. Haswell," said the man of tobacco, handing me a letter.

The same writing—the same slip of paper.

"Remember! Her bare foot! Postponed! Await further notice."

By this time surprise had given way to anger. I tore the slip into bits. Moreover, it was depressing—the persistency with which I was followed by these notes, and the knowledge evinced by this man in the dark, of my habits and customs. It was positively weird and uncanny.

After this the notes ceased, for awhile

a condition of virtuous indignation. Up to this time, apparently resenting the idea of my being in charge of the establishment, she had merely tolerated my existence; now she came to give me orders.

"There is a woman in the reception room you must see," she said.

There was trouble for me; I knew it from the peculiar emphasis our cashier gave to the word "woman." And I further knew that she had a poor opinion of our visitor, even doubts as to her moral character.

"What is it?" I asked, as professionally as I could.

"She wants to have a picture taken undressed. I want you to send her away." The cashier sniffed most virtuously.

"What!" I exclaimed, filled with the same virtuous indignation.

I dropped everything, determined to preserve the spotless purity of Williams's studio, even at the peril of my temper. I went at once to the reception room. But I was unprepared for the appearance of the woman whose errand was fraught with such danger to the good repute of the establishment. A less likely person for a sitting in scant drapery it would have been difficult to conceive. Gray haired; sixty, if a day; two hundred, if she weighed a pound; her broad and ample figure was the very antithesis of Venus, or Juno, or Hebe, or Helen, or any other of those ancient ladies whose faces were their fortunes.

The cashier had made a sad blunder. So, instead of meeting the woman fiercely, I mildly asked her wishes. Though the cashier was mistaken, in the reply of the woman I received as great a shock as if she had asked to be taken in the character of Mother Eve. She desired to know if we would take a picture of a bare foot.

The mysterious affair was up in a new form. I was confused for the moment; all sorts of possibilities crowded



"It had fallen near where the girl was standing, and she had concealed it by the simple method of putting her foot upon it."

left, from which side they seemed to come. A tall, elderly gentleman was at my shoulder, but he was talking animatedly to the lady on his arm. He could not have been the whisperer.

Behind me was a bevy of young girls, chattering like magpies, under the convoy of a sedate matron. It could not have been either of these.

On my immediate right, an ex-mayor of the city and a celebrated lawyer discussed the play. Certainly it was neither of these.

I was puzzled and annoyed. In the tone of the whisper there was warning, and another quality—what? That I could not determine, yet it incited me to quarrel with somebody; but on looking about I could find no eligible person to quarrel with.

From the theatre I went for my midnight chop and mug of ale. The mysterious incident lingered with me. I could not dismiss it. Whose bare foot? What about it? Why should I remember it? Answers were not forthcoming. Within my knowledge was nothing to which the whispered words could have relation. Vexed with myself that I should give so much heed to the incident and permit it to spoil the enjoyment of my meal, I left the chop house in a temper with myself. Before doing so, I transferred my latch-key from a pocket of my trousers to one in my top coat, for the night was cold, and I protected myself against delay and the opening of my coat at the street door.

During my walk home it seemed to me that everybody that passed, even the cab horses, whispered those irritating words to me. I am quite certain that at Thirty-third Street, Horace Greeley bent down from his granite perch to do so, and I know I detected in his stony eyes a leer—a malicious leer.

When, on reaching my street door, I put my hand into my pocket for the latch-key, I felt a slip of paper. I took it out with the key. Under the dimly

was not a trick of the imagination, as I had been trying to persuade myself.

Mystified, I went to bed, but to an uneasy and dream-haunted sleep, in which bare feet of all sizes and shapes floated in the air, twinkled their pink toes, or winked, or grinned, or leered at me, while one persistent foot planted itself on my chest to inform me that it had knowledge of all my peccadillos.

The morning found me nervous and unrefreshed. However, had it not been for the indubitable evidence of the slip of paper lying on my table, I think I might have dismissed the incident as an effect of disordered imagination. But there it was to tell its tale.

That morning I had an appointment with Chester Williams, a kindred soul in a hobby of mine—amateur photography—and who, beginning as an amateur and ending as an adept, had opened a suite of rooms, which he called a "studio," having a high regard for his art. Here I was accustomed to spend much time in experiment, to his profit and my pleasure.

As I entered the studio, Williams handed me a letter.

"Found it on the floor," he said briefly.

Taking the letter, I glanced at the address and started visibly. I was familiar with the writing now, at least. There was no doubt about the address:

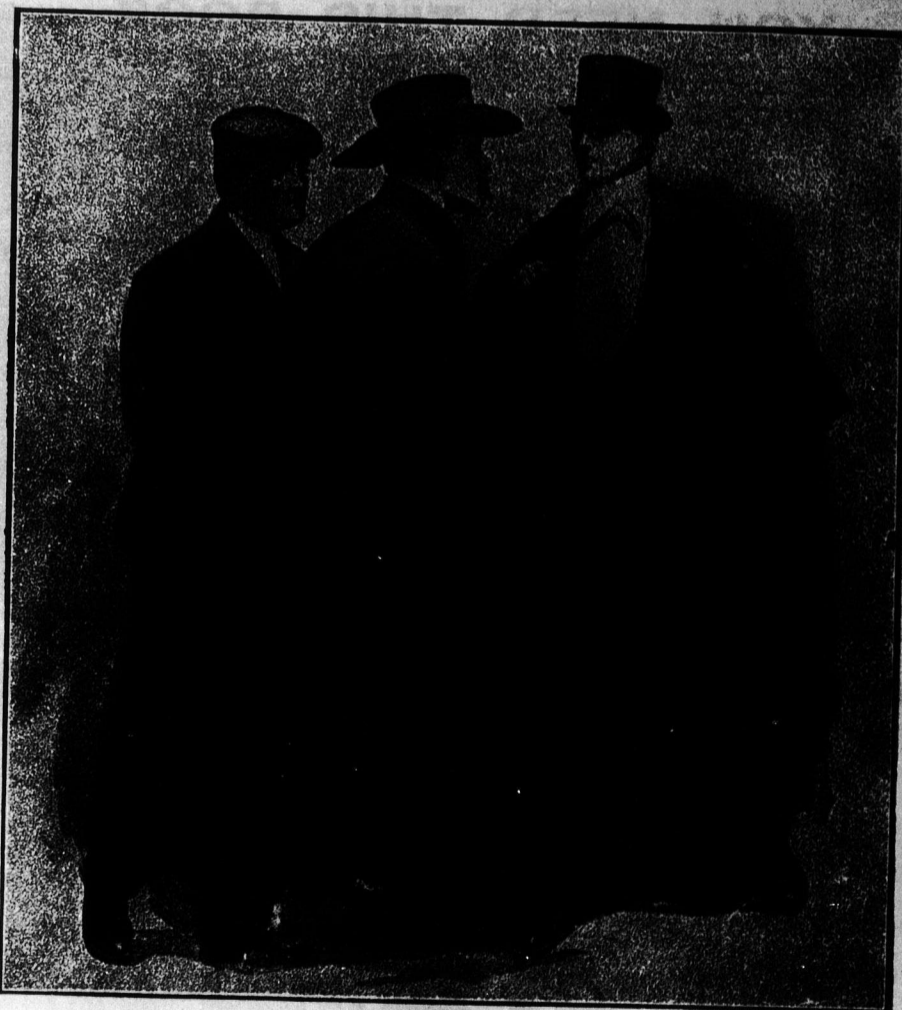
"Charles Haswell, Esq., care of Mr. Chester Williams, Present.

I tore off the envelope; the same kind of a slip of paper as I had found in my pocket. On it was written:

"Remember! Her bare foot! Be prepared! Do not leave town."

I was dumbfounded. None of my correspondents and few of my friends knew of my visits to Williams's studio. Who was this mysterious person who was whispering warnings and writing imploring memoranda to me to remember somebody's bare foot?

I handed the slip to Williams.



"As they came close to me, one bent down suddenly and peered into my face."

at least, and I was free to devote myself with undisturbed mind to Williams's studio. His predictions were verified; there was little to do, and I made sad havoc among his chemicals and materials in my experiments.

Several days had passed very pleasantly, and I had almost forgotten the affair of the whisper, when the cashier came to me in the camera room. She was in

upon my mind. But dimly through my consciousness stole the sense of her words; it was not her bare foot, but that of another person that was to be photographed, and if we consented she would be back in an hour with that person.

We consented.

With all the severity I could summon, I upbraided the cashier for her blunder,