

OUT OF THE WEB

A Small Sized Revelation of Dangers That May Beset a Pretty Girl in a Large City and of the Guiding Hand That Guards

By LEIGH GORDON GILTNER

ELENA ran lightly down the steps of the rather dingy apartment house, paused for a deep breath of the chill air—as refreshing as a cold plunge after the super-heated atmosphere of the flat—and set off down the Avenue with a fine, free step, which, while not essentially rustic, yet proclaimed her alien to the city's streets.

It was a dull early March day, but it seemed to brighten perceptibly with the advent of Elena into its raw grayness. The coat the girl wore was of brown blanket cloth and the close-fitting little hat showed palpably the prentice hand of some village milliner; yet the face beneath was fair and fresh and young; the hair gleaming vivid gold even on this murky afternoon, and her eyes as blue as the violets she paused to purchase from a florist's and pin against the fluff outer garment.

Elena's month in the metropolis might have held disappointment and disillusionment had she been circumstanced like the average young woman who comes to the city in quest of employment; but her rather cursory search for "something to do" had not been accelerated by the spur of necessity. Her capacity was limited to the usual girlish accomplishments; she sang a little; played a little; danced charmingly; painted atrociously in water colors, and, in this age of specialists, possessed no special gift or training for the grim business of self-support. She was not wholly unaware of her incapacity for efficient service—indeed she secretly questioned her ability to hold a position should she succeed in securing it, and she had been prepared for discouragements, so her disappointment at her failure to find employment was not great. The quest, indeed, had been throughout rather in the nature of a "lark".

Elena's father, dying a year previous, had left his widow and her daughter, in the Brookfield vernacular, "well-off". There had been life insurance to the amount of some thousands and a small but fertile farm which had brought a sum sufficient to have maintained Mrs. Brown and Elena quite comfortably in their native village.

But the spirit of young adventure was strong in pretty Elena. She was intensely, tinglingly alive; her keen ardor and enthusiasm for life in its larger phases found slight satisfaction in the dull round of existence in Brookfield; she wanted to live, to experience, to see, to learn; and always the metropolis had been her Mecca. And after the death of her father and the disposal of their property, there was no real reason why they should remain in Brookfield. They had no close ties or interests; Elena was all eagerness to seek new and wider fields and Mrs. Brown was as plastic clay in her daughter's hands.

So ultimately they had gone, bag and baggage, to the city; found apartments in "The Fonda," a comfortable if not fashionable flat building in a convenient locality; Elena soothing her conscience the while, when she thought of the outlay incident to their removal, with the vague assurance that she would presently "find something" which would at least help to meet expenses. But, unlike the usual seeker after employment, she recognized no special necessity for haste, so she went her way in leisurely fashion, answered an occasional advertisement, and generally and genuinely enjoyed herself.

She was just eighteen—an age at which the simplest circumstance seems fraught with alluring possibilities. Adventure lurked round every corner; a walk in the Park was pregnant with probable meetings with hitherto unrealized dream heroes; a ride in the suburbs smacked of mystery and romance; while the gorgeous shop windows, the hurrying throngs, the richly gowned women, the endless streams of smart carriages and motors were as good as a pageant to the country-bred girl and her timid, admiring mother.

At first Mrs. Brown had been unwilling to allow Elena out of her sight and in the awed bewilderment of her initial experience in the congested city, Elena had found herself afraid to venture a block away from the flat building. But each day brought new daring, with increased familiarity with the surroundings; her walks lengthened; she began to explore the neighborhood; she ventured upon Yonge Street and along the Avenue, feeling a sense of exhilaration and freedom in the knowledge that no watchful village eye was upon her, following her every movement, commenting upon her costume and actions, and speculating as to her possible purchases, as was ever the case in Brookfield.

Yet, even here, had Elena but guessed it, observant eyes followed her—had followed her for days. She did not dream that the well-dressed, elderly woman who had stood beside her as she gazed into a jeweler's window one day had been attracted by her vivid pastoral prettiness; had taken in every detail of her village-made costume; had scrutinized her sharply and shrewdly, noting her air of unfamiliarity with her urban surroundings; had stalked her till she turned homeward and had kept her in sight until she entered her own door; and that thereafter whenever she had walked abroad she was under surveillance.

She had heard much of the perils and pitfalls of the city, but it did not even remotely occur to her that she, simple little rustic Elena Brown, might possibly be a marked object, the intended victim of one of the shrewdest operators in Toronto.

As she paused, on this particular afternoon, at the intersection of Queen and Yonge Streets and stood waiting the official signal to cross, a bit bewildered by the congestion of traffic and the noise of passing cars, a well-groomed, well-dressed young fellow, (in no wise distinguishable from a hundred other young men about town) whom Chance had apparently stranded at her side, turned and spoke to her. At first Elena was unaware that his remark, which she had not quite caught, was addressed to her. Evidently he realized this for he at once repeated it. The remark in itself was inoffensive and his manner was disarmingly courteous.

"I beg your pardon"—he lifted his hat—"but perhaps you'd let me pilot you across. You seem to be a stranger."

Elena had been carefully reared and the older Brookfielders had feelingly assured her that Toronto was a cheerful composite of Sodom and Gomorrah up to date, while to speak to a stranger, masculine or feminine, in its confines was to invite disaster of the direst. Accordingly she gazed straight ahead, ignoring alike the stranger and his remark, crossed when the officer gave the signal and saw the impertinent youth no more.

She was careful not to mention the occurrence to her mother. Mrs. Brown was naturally a timid woman and her sense of utter unfamiliarity with her present surroundings accentuated her fearfulness. Whenever possible she accompanied Elena on her walks abroad, and she never permitted her to leave the house without a card bearing her name and address in her handbag and duplicates in her various pockets. Her pride in her daughter's independence and strength of character sustained her to a degree, but



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it could not save her anxious moments whenever the girl was out of her sight. In the most cheerful of her imaginings, she invariably visioned her daughter as the prey of some monster of metropolitan wickedness or knocked down by a passing motor and brought home in an ambulance. Therefore Elena forebore to trouble her with what she herself regarded as an incident the most trivial.

Nor did she mention a somewhat similar experience which befell her a few days later. There came a crisp, clear, chilly day of March sunshine, and Elena, accustomed to the active outdoor life of the farm, was all eagerness to get out into the open. Queen's Park lured her with its waning wintry beauty and a brisk walk within its confines set her veins a-tingle and brought a sparkle to her eyes. She was looking unusually lovely—a fact of which she was delightfully unconscious; an air of urban poise was beginning to displace her shyness; she walked with head well up and chest expanded, her eyes bright, her cheeks vividly aglow, her lips temptingly crimson. She was just turning reluctantly homeward, when a youth, apparently of the type one sees in metropolitan Club windows, accosted her.

"Why, hello, Edith," he said blithely, "what's the good word with you to-day?" Elena gasped slightly but made no reply.

"Now, Edith, really," the young man laughed, "what are you handing me? I don't catch the idea. Shake hands, won't you?" Elena hurried on, ignoring the hand he extended.

"I beg your pardon," came the voice in a changed tone, "but surely I'm not mistaken in thinking you Miss Blythe?"

"I'm not Miss Blythe," Elena said shortly; it seemed the simplest way of ridding herself of the youth, who continued to walk beside her as she quickened her pace.

"Oh, come now, Edie,"—laying a detaining hand upon her arm—"what have I done to be treated like this? Why are you frosting me? A joke's well enough in its way, but this has gone far enough. I couldn't mistake you in a mob; there's no use running a fool bluff. Don't you want me to walk with you?"

"I certainly do not," said Elena sharply, "I've told you you were mistaken and if you continue to annoy me, I'll call an officer and give you in charge." The man shrugged indifferently.

"Oh all right, girly. Have it your own way. But I don't quite get on to your little game. Sure you won't change your mind and have tea with me at the Prince Albert? Well, suit yourself. So long, my dear." And he strode away without a backward glance.

But Elena's blithe mood had fled; the brightness of the day was shadowed by the crass, unlovely episode. Angry tears of hurt and humiliation filled her eyes.

"I wonder," she asked herself, "if I strike strangers as the style of girl to encourage—this sort of thing?"

A handsome, elderly woman who had witnessed the scene from the opposite side of the street, crossed and approached the girl. She was tastefully attired to the last detail and her manner left nothing to be desired. She had a fine, benevolent face, framed with soft silver hair and her voice, when she spoke, was low and caressing.

"Pardon me, my dear," she said gently, "but I chanced to witness the indignity to which you were subjected just now. It seems a pity that a young girl can't walk abroad without the possibility of affront. I fancy you're a stranger in our city and I fear your opinion of Toronto isn't very favorable, at the moment, but believe me, dear child, all Torontonians are not of that type. There are ill-bred, impertinent youths to be met with everywhere and a pretty girl is their legitimate prey, especially if she seems lonely and unprotected. . . . But you're naturally quite upset. Won't you waive ceremony and come home with me? I live just a short distance away. I'll give you a cup of tea, mother you a little and send you home in a taxi, when you have had time to grow calmer." Very winningly she smiled down at the girl beside her; her voice was mellow and gently persuasive and her personality was sufficiently magnetic almost to induce the girl to accept the friendly offer. Almost. Not quite, however.

"Why, thank you very much; you're very good I'm sure," Elena was hesitating, when suddenly something—she could not have said what—warned her of the indiscretion of accepting a courtesy at the hands of a total stranger.

She pulled herself together. "But I'm quite calm, thank you. The man was annoying, but he was easily disposed of. I'm not frightened or upset; just a bit hurt and angry—that's all. I appreciate your kindness very much—but my mother will be waiting for me and I mustn't make her anxious. Thank you and—goodbye."

Although Elena kept this adventure strictly to herself, thereafter she seldom left the house without her mother, who very willingly accompanied her. Elena was not vain, but even she could not help observing the admiring glances strangers turned upon her or fail to note how the casual eye lingered upon her face. Once or twice, in her search for a position, she had met, with disarming ingenuousness, overtures tentative and skilfully veiled, yet of unmistakable import; but she was rapidly acquiring the gentle art of side-stepping and she sedulously avoided those offices and agencies where she was received with too marked cordiality.

Her mother presently arrived at the decision that, with economy, they could live without the necessity of Elena taking a position, so the girl gradually abandoned the quest and began to cast about for some means of filling the days to drag a little. They went occasionally to the theatre, taking the cheaper seats, and for a time Elena was fired with the ambition to shine in the chorus of some musical comedy, but her mother's horror and dismay when she broached the subject effectually disposed of that idea. So Elena read, walked, embroidered and—drifted.

Early in April Mrs. Brown contracted a severe spring cold, which while not serious, sufficed to keep her close indoors, since the weather was on its worst behavior. Elena dutifully stayed with her until the mother's watchful eye noted that she seemed listless and dull and that her bright color was less vivid than its wont. Her heart smote her at what she termed her "selfishness."

"Why not go to a picture show this afternoon, Elena?" she suggested. "You've been housed for days and you need a breath of fresh air. Take a brisk walk, stop in at a 'movie' and get back early. I'll manage famously—have a nap, read the paper and get tea all ready for you when you come in."

Elena, who was indeed feeling the close confinement, gladly fell in with the suggestion. In ten minutes she was ready for the street, and as she entered the room in all the radiance of her rare young loveliness, it was small wonder that her mother's glance dwelt proudly upon her.

"Have a good time, Elena," she said fondly, "and get back early"—little dreaming as she spoke that her cherished daughter might never come back to her—either early or late.

It was possibly that protecting Providence which safeguards the otherwise unprotected which ordained that "Scoop" Ewing ("Channing" to his adoring parents, most appositely—"Scoop" to his fellows on the *Evening Star*) should have dropped in to refill his cigar case at Young as he was, Ewing had lived much and variously. He knew Toronto intimately and accurately; and he

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