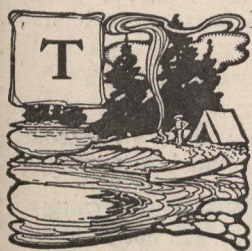


THE BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

The Strange Adventure of an Amateur Detective.



THE fact that I am an actor, and love to sit up late, made this story possible.

It was in the year 1904 that I occupied a suite of rooms in Guildford Street, Bloomsbury, W.C., for the first time. The year 1904 saw a great change in my professional prospects. I had come from the obscurity of provincial tours, to London distinction. A part I played well in a revival at Manchester had pleased the great man from London. An engagement had followed, and here I was, in the year 1904, playing in an important London theatre, and playing an important part with conspicuous success. Guildford Street became my living-place, near as it is to the West End, and here, in the heart of London, for about three years, during my first London success, I lived.

By day, Guildford Street is a busy thoroughfare. A line of 'buses run through it, while much of the traffic to the railway stations also rumbles along the street. But Guildford Street, like every other street, has its hours of silence—the few hours in which to go to sleep. Now, the actor is a night-bird. He loves the few hours which follow the play. He loves the supper after the theatre with a chosen friend, the merry hour at the club, the quiet hour of privacy over the last cigar. I was no exception to the rule, and most nights of the working week, midnight would be long gone by before I pulled my favourite easy-chair to the fire-side for the last comfortable hour of easy speculation before turning in for the night. Acting is a business making for development of the nervous senses, and these hours spent after the show are necessary for the regaining of that self-repose which means sleep.

And it is not surprising that this mode of life develops the nervous senses. Even the hearing begins to distinguish the uncommon, and, in a sense, to observe. Perhaps you have sat in a silent room and noticed how the ear begins to take special notice of things. I know that when I sat alone in this Guildford Street room my ear kept unwavering attention on the sounds of the streets. The policeman's tread, the footfall of a woman, the uneven footfall of a drunken reveller are only casual suggestions of what I mean. In the diminishing noises from without, I picked out certain characteristic footsteps instinctively—came to know them as a dog seems to know its master's footfall. And these things I noticed unconsciously, as I smoked and thought or read in the quiet hours.

I remember, after I had been there a few weeks, one noise in the traffic, by its frequent and regular repetition, began to stand out more and more, and to compel my attention, until I commenced not only to notice it acutely, but to anticipate it. I found that out of the casual wayfarers who passed the house, the same man passed every night at half-past one. There was something so distinctive about his footfall. Every night, as the clocks around chimed the half-hour after one, I heard this wayfarer turn the street corner. His approach was heralded by the metallic ring of a stick, apparently heavy, with a thick ferrule. It rang on the flags with a peculiar, distinct, and regular note, nearer and nearer. Then with it I could hear the footsteps. They were velvety, catlike, but just slightly irregular. They seemed to be put down as a tiger plants its paws—carefully, as if each footstep were a prelude to a crouch. And the second footstep, dragged a little, made the marked irregularity, and suggested the slightest of limps. So the footsteps would come out of the quiet, pass slowly down the street, leaving the ring of the ferrule to stand out alone with diminishing force as the wayfarer crept, farther and farther away, to a distance beyond my hearing.

Now, every night, at half-past one, if I were at home, I heard that man pass with his spring and a limp and the tap, tap, tap of his ferruled staff; and as the nights went on, I began to listen for him long before he came. At five minutes to the half-hour my senses were all alert, and I would wait, and never in vain. The footsteps would creep and the stick would ring, as their owner passed down the street. I began to speculate over him, to wonder on what errand he went so regularly, whether he was going or coming, where he started from, and at what point he ended. I had hazy ideas of going out to meet him.

By GEORGE EDGAR

You will see how curiously it affected me when I tell you that I had Jimmy Somerset sharing my rooms early in 1905—January of that year. The very first night of our stay we had comfortably made our camp round the big fire, after the show, and over hot whiskey were talking of professional doings. And just then, as I took my glass from the mantelpiece, I noticed the hour. It was twenty-five minutes after one, and outside there was not a sound.

"Jimmy," I said, "you would not think it, but I'm a prophet."

Jimmy blew a cloud of smoke out, and lazily drawled: "Prophecy, then; that's what the prophets do."

"I will," I said, sitting up, eagerly. "It is just one-twenty-five by the clock. Watch it. By the time it goes one-thirty, you will hear an iron ferrule ringing on the flags. Then you will hear the accompanying footsteps. One will be clear and catlike. The other will drag just ever such a little."

Jimmy took a pull at his smoking glass, then tapped his forehead sardonically. "I'll tell you what it is, Alan; too much success and too much work! You are just a bit touched."

He tapped his head again derisively. I seized his arm and pointed to the clock. It was just half-past one.

"Listen," I said. "I am a prophet, dear man; but I am something more—I am a prophet whose prophecy comes true."

We stood there a few moments in silence. Outside, a public clock struck. Then, like an answer, came the tap, tap, tap of the iron ferrule. The tap, tap, tap advanced; then with the metallic ring came the sound of footsteps, the clear, careful step first, followed by the footstep which dragged behind. They came nearer, were louder as they came, passed the house, grew fainter and fainter, until all that was left of the passing sound was the receding, regular beats of the ferruled stick.

"Now, Jimmy!" I said.

"Prophet," he answered. "Prophet of the prophets—the maker of prophecies that come true. How is it done?"

I told him briefly.

"Nerves," he said. "It's good business for you that I have come to live here. When a man gets to listening to noises in the street at night he ought to do two things—go to bed early and drop his nightcaps. Or," he added, "he might marry."

All the same, the passing footsteps got on Jimmy Somerset's nerves just as much as they did on mine. I found him testing their appearance by the clock every night we sat alone together. No matter what we happened to be doing, saying, or thinking, when the clocks began to strike the half-hour after one, a pause would ensue, our eyes would meet, and we would listen expectantly. And always we were answered by the first sound of the unknown pilgrim's approach—the tap, tap, of the iron ferrule on the flags.

Weeks went by and we noticed the footsteps regularly, and more and more the nightly incident got on our nerves.

At last—it was a Friday night—Jimmy might have spoken my thoughts. Just as the clock struck one his face wore a thoughtful expression for a moment.

"Look here, Alan," he said, "that old trudge's stick and footsteps worry me. I am just eaten up with curiosity. I want to see what he is like and have a guess at what he is."

"That is just what I've been thinking for months. I agree absolutely, and to put the matter into action I suggest we go out to-night and wait for the old thief," I said jestingly.

"Now why do you call him a thief?" Jimmy promptly asked, so promptly that I had evidently hit exactly on his thoughts.

"Because he walks like a thief or some other predatory beast," I answered promptly. "He walks like a man who plots."

"Alan, we are getting womanish; we are becoming intuitive—Sherlock Holmes and that sort of thing. But do you know that is exactly what I think, too?"

"Well, let us go and have a look at him," I said.

We hastily seized coats and caps and hurried into the dark street. As we pulled the front door to the clock was just chiming 1.15. It was as cold as farthest north. The wind swept the dark streets

with a weird moan, and it cut one's face like a blight.

"Pooh!" said Jimmy, as he turned his collar up, "we are a pair of nervous old women. Fancy coming into this to see a grubby old man go by with a limp."

"Never mind, Jimmy, we'll see him now we are out. We ought to be hearing him soon."

The street was absolutely silent. There was not a soul about. Not even a cab broke the chilly ghostliness of the frowning Bloomsbury thoroughfare. We walked slowly down the road towards the Foundling Hospital, finally standing at the corner of the square leading into Red Lion Street under a gas lamp. A minute or two in that chilling wind cooled our ardour and both of us were half repentant, when suddenly we heard a door bang in Red Lion Street. Immediately after we heard the well-known tap, tap of the iron ferrule.

"He's coming," Jimmy whispered, with awakened interest.

I pulled out my watch and noted it wanted two minutes to the half-hour, and he took just exactly that time in coming to the street corner. We saw his black form coming nearer and nearer, and began to talk naturally as if we were dropping each other in the way home.

I got a photographic picture of him as he passed the next nearest light. He was old and bent. He wore a hat pulled down well over his eyes—a faded, battered hat. His coat, a great one, was shabby and green with age, turned up at the collar. A grey-white beard flickered in the light. There was something sinister in the tap, tap of the ferrule, the quick, sure step of one foot, the slight limp or shuffle in the other, and the cringing, bowed figure moving swifter than he appeared to travel.

We went on talking and every step brought him nearer. Now he was a few yards away; now on us. I had just time for a square glance at him. I noticed most that the hand grasping the stick was thin and surprisingly white, with veins and muscles standing up like whip-cords. He raised his face towards the light, hearing us talking. His features were thin and covered with shaggy white hair, and the bottom lip drooped with the lack of control one sees in an animal. Then I noticed he seemed to be coming straight at us. We were still talking. He hesitated for a moment, tapping irresolutely. In a flash both Jimmy and I realised a curious fact. On his breast was pinned a tin plate bearing the one word—blind—and what I took to be shadows on his face were eye-shades.

Jimmy promptly grasped his arm.

"Steady on, old chap—steady."

With a deft movement Jimmy piloted him clear of ourselves and the corner.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," he said, "but you see how it is. I thank you kindly, sir." The voice whined with a sound that seemed as cold and unsympathetic as the ring of his iron ferrule.

The clock struck 1.30 as he turned the corner. Tap, tap, step, and faint shuffle; tap, tap, step, and faint shuffle—farther and farther away he went down Guildford Street until he turned the corner into Russell Square.

"Here's for home," said Jimmy. "We are a pair of owls—a blind beggar!"

"But he did not beg," I said.

We mounted our stairs together. Jimmy pulled out the whiskey and poured out a peg. We sat thawing.

"Look here, Jimmy," I said lazily, "there were two things about that blind beggar man which were rather mysterious."

"I know one," Jimmy answered, languidly stretching his feet to the fire; "he did not beg."

"Right, my dear Sherlock," I said, "that was one. But the other—"

"Oh, I'll give it up, Alan."

"Well, the door banged in Red Lion Street. He was not going home; he was starting out."

"Gee—that's a funny gag," Jimmy said lightly. "Must be a midnight mud-raker and collect cigar stumps."

"But he cannot see," I said.

"Then perhaps he's an assistant at a coffee stall," Jimmy concluded, flippantly, and we left it at that for the moment.

II.

FURTHER speculation about the blind man who went tapping down my street came to an end automatically. My season in town was drawing to