The Blind Man's Eyes

By

WILLIAM MacHARG
EDWIN BALMER

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CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

—16—

She told him, beginning with her discovery of Eaton in the garage and ending with his leaving her and with Donald Avery's finding her in the motor; and now she held back one word only—his name which he had told her, Hugh. Her father listened intently.

"You and Mr. Eaton appear to have become rather well acquainted, Harriet," he said. "Has he told you nothing about himself which you have not told me? You have seen nothing concerning him, which you have not told?"

Her mind went quickly back to the polo game; she felt a flush, which his blind eyes could not see, dyeing her cheeks and forehead.

The blind man waited for a moment; he put out his hand and pressed the bell which called the steward. Neither spoke until the steward came.

"Fairley," Santoine said then, quietly, "Miss Santoine and I have just agreed that for the present all reports regarding the pursuit of the men who entered the study last night are to be made direct to me, not through Miss Santoine or Mr. Avery."

"Very well, sir."

She still sat silent after the steward had gone; she thought for an instant her father had forgotten her presence; then he moved slightly.

"That is all, dear," he said quietly.

She got up and left him, and went to her own rooms; she did not pretend to herself that she could rest. She bathed and dressed and went downstairs. The library had windows facing to the west; she went in there and stood looking out.

Her mind was upon only one thing—even of that she could not think connectedly. Some years ago, something she did not know what, had happened to Hugh; tonight, in some strange way unknown to her, it had culminated in her father's study. He had fought someone; he had rushed away to follow someone. Whom? Had he heard that someone in the study and gone down? Had he been fighting their battle—her father's and hers? She knew that was not so. Hugh had been fully dressed. What did it mean that he had said to her that these events would either destroy him or would send him back to her as—as something different? Her thought stupified to answer.

But whatever he had done whatever he might be, she knew his fate was hers now, for she had given herself to him openly. She had told that to herself as she fled and pursued with him in her night, she had told it to hang she could feel it, though she had not caught its meaning. She could only wait—wait for the coming of the events of a night which had come a year to bring her her lover to her door.

She went to the rooms that had been Eaton's. The police, in searching them of his possessions, had overlooked his cap; she found the bit of gray cloth and brought it to her. She whispered his name to herself—Hugh—that secret of his name which she had kept; she gloried that she had that secret with him which she could keep from them all. What would he give just to share that with her—his name Hugh?

She started suddenly, looking through the window. The east above the lake was beginning to grow gray. The dawn was coming? It was beginning to be day!

She hurried to the other side of the house, looking toward the west. How could she have left him, hurt and bleeding and alone in the night? She could not have done that but that his asking her to go had told that it was for his safety as well as hers; she could not help him any more then; she would only have been in the way. But now she started to rush out, but controlled herself; she had to stay in the house; that was where the first word would come if they caught him; and then he would need her, how much more! The reporters on the lawn below her, seeing her at the window, called up to her to know further particulars of what had happened and what the murder meant; she could see them plainly in the increasing light. She could see the lawn and the road before the house.

Day had come.

And with the coming of day, the uncertainty and disorder within and about the house seemed to increase. . . . But in the south wing, with its sound-proof doors and its windows closed against the noises from the lawn, there was silence; and in this silence, an exact, compelling, methodic machine was working; the mind of Basil Santoine was striving, vainly as yet, but with growing chances of success, to fit together into the order in which they belonged and make clear the events of the night and all that had gone before—arranging, ordering, testing, discarding, picking up again and reordering all that had happened since that other murder, of Gabriel Warden.

CHAPTER XX

What One Can Do Without Eyes.

Three men—at least three men had fought in the study in Santoine's presence. Eaton, it was certain, had been the only one from the house present when the first shots were fired. Had Eaton been alone against the other two? Had Eaton been with one of the other two against the third? It appeared probable to Santoine that Eaton had been alone, or had come alone, to the study and had met his enemies there.

Santoine felt that the probabilities were that Eaton's enemies had opened the safe and had been surprised by Eaton. But if they had opened the safe, they were not only Eaton's enemies; they were also Santoine's; they were the men who threatened Santoine's trust.

Those whom Eaton had fought in the room had had perfect opportunity for killing Santoine, if they wished. But Santoine felt certain no one had made any attack upon him at any moment in the room; he had had no feeling, at any instant, that any of the shots fired had been directed at him. Blatchford, too, had been unattacked until he had made it plain that he had recognized one of the intruders; then, before Blatchford could call the name, he had been shot down.

It was clear, then, that what had protected Santoine was his blindness; he had no doubt that, if he had been able to see and recognize the men in the room after the lights were turned on, he would have been shot down also. But Santoine recognized that this did not fully account for his immunity. Two weeks before, an attack which had been meant for Eaton had struck down Santoine instead; and no further attempt against Eaton had been made until it had become publicly known that Santoine was not going to die. If Santoine's death would have served for Eaton's death two weeks before, why was Santoine immune now? Did possession of the contents of Santoine's safe accomplish the same thing as Santoine's death? Or more than his death for these men? For what men?

It was not, Santoine was certain, Eaton's presence in the study which had so astounded Blatchford, Wallace and Eaton had passed days together, and Blatchford was accustomed to Eaton's presence in the house. Someone whom Blatchford knew and whose name Santoine also would know and whose presence in the room was so strange and astonishing that Blatchford had tried to prepare Santoine for the announcement, had been there. The man whose name was on Blatchford's tongue, or the companion of that man, had shot Blatchford rather than let Santoine hear the name.

He was beginning to find events fit themselves together; but they fitted imperfectly as yet.

Santoine knew that he lacked the key. Many men could profit by possessing the contents of Santoine's safe and might have shot Blatchford rather than let Santoine know their presence there; it was futile for Santoine to tell who in among these really thousands who had been in the study might be. Will Eaton's enemies were safe? Impossible to say. But there could be but one hand for at least most of them to play. The night he gave the signal was Eaton's enemy and Santoine's. To have known who Eaton was would have permitted this man to Santoine.

Gabriel Warden had had an appointment with a foreign man who had come from Asia and who Warden had told his wife he had discovered lately had been grossly wronged. Eaton, under Conductor Conroy's questioning, had admitted himself to be that young man; Santoine had verified this and had learned that Eaton was, at least, the young man who had gone to Warden's house that night. But Gabriel Warden had not been allowed to help Eaton; so far from that, he had not even been allowed to meet and talk with Eaton; he had been called out, plainly, to prevent his meeting Eaton, and killed.

Eaton disappeared and concealed himself at once after Warden's murder, apparently fearing that he would also be attacked. But Eaton was not a man whom this personal fear would have restrained from coming forward later to tell why Warden had been killed. He had been urged to come forward and promised that others would give him help in Warden's place; still, he had concealed himself. This must mean that others than Warden could not help Eaton; Eaton evidently did not know, or else could not hope to prove, what Warden had discovered.

Santoine held this thought in abeyance; he would see later how it checked with the facts.

Eaton had remained in Seattle—or near Seattle—eleven days; apparently and to escape attack during that time, he had been able to conceal himself. He had been obliged, however, to reveal himself when he took the train; and as soon as possible a desperate attempt had been made against him, which, through mistake, had struck down Santoine instead of Eaton.

Eaton had taken the train at Seattle because Santoine was on it; he had done this at great risk to himself. The possibilities were that Eaton had taken the train to inform Santoine of something or to learn something from him. But Eaton had had ample opportunity since to inform Santoine of anything he wished; and he had not only not informed him of anything, but had refused consistently and determinedly to answer any of Santoine's questions. It was to learn something from Santoine, then, that Eaton had taken the train.

The blind man turned upon his bed; he was finding that events fitted together perfectly. He felt certain now that Eaton had gone to Gabriel Warden expecting to get from Warden some information that he needed, and that to prevent Warden's giving him this, Warden had been killed. Then Warden's death had caused Santoine to go to Seattle and take charge of many of Warden's affairs; Eaton had thought that the information which had been in Warden's possession might now be in Santoine's; Eaton, therefore, had followed Santoine onto the train.

The inference was plain that something which would have given Santoine the information Warden had had and which Eaton now required had been brought into Santoine's house and put in Santoine's safe. It was to get possession of this "something" before it had reached Santoine that the safe had been forced.

Santoine put out his hand and pressed a bell. A servant came to the door.

"Will you find Miss Santoine," the blind man directed, "and ask her to come here?"

The servant withdrew.

Santoine waited. Presently the door again opened, and he heard his daughter's step.

"Have you listed what was taken from the safe, Harriet?" Santoine asked.

"Not yet, Father."

The blind man thought an instant. "Harriet, something has been brought into the house—or the manner of keeping something in the house has been changed—within a very few days—since the time, I think, when the attempt to run Eaton down with the motor car was made. What was that 'something'?"

His daughter reflected. "The draft of the new agreement about the Latron properties and the lists of stockholders in the properties which came through Mr. Warden's office," she replied.

"Those were in the safe?"

"Yes; you had not given me any instructions about them, so I had put them in the other safe; but when I went to get the correspondence I saw them there and put them with the correspondence in my own safe."

Santoine lay still.

"Who besides Donald knew that you did that, Daughter?" he asked.

"No one."

"Thank you."

Harriet recognized this as dismissal and went out. The blind man felt the blood beating fiercely in his temples and at his finger-tips. It amazed, astounded him to realize that Warden's murder and all that had followed it had sprung from the Latron case. He recollected that he had been vaguely conscious ever since Latron's murder of something strained, something not wholly open, in his relations with those men whose interests had been most closely allied with Latron's. It had been nothing open, nothing public; it was only that he had felt at times in them a knowledge of some general condition governing them which was not wholly known to himself. Whoever Blatchford had seen was someone well known to him, whose presence had been so amazing that speech had failed Blatchford for the moment and he had feared the effect of the announcement on Santoine. This could have been only the principal himself.

"Have You Listed What Was Taken From the Safe, Harriet?" Santoine Asked.

Some circumstance which Santoine comprehended only imperfectly as yet had forced this man to come out from behind his agents and to act even at the risk of revealing himself. It was probably he who, finding Blatchford's presence made revealment inevitable, had killed Blatchford. But these circumstances gave Santoine no clew as to who the man might be. The blind man tried vainly to guess. The only circumstance regarding the man of which Santoine now felt sure was that he was one of the many concerned in the Latron case or with the Latron properties.

"What time is it?" the blind man suddenly asked the nurse.

"It is nearly noon, Mr. Santoine."

"Will you leave me alone for a few moments?" he directed.

He listened till he heard the door close behind the nurse; then he seized the private 'phone beside his bed and called his broker.

"How is the market?" he inquired.

There was something approaching to a panic on the stock exchange, it appeared. Some movement, arising from causes not yet clear, had dropped the bottom out of a score of important stocks.

"How is Pacific Midlands?" Santoine asked.

"It led the decline."

Santoine felt the blood in his temples. "M. and N. Smelters?" he asked.

"Down seven points."

"S. F. and D?"

"Eight points off."

Santoine's hand, holding the telephone, shook in its agitation; his head was hot from the blood rushing through it, his body was chilled. An idea so strange, so astounding, so incredible as it first had come to him that his feelings refused it though his reason told him it was the only possible condition which could account for all the facts, now was being made all but certain. He named stock after stock; all were down—seriously depressed or had been supported only by a desperate effort of their chief holders.

The blind man could write as well as any other by following the position of the lines with the fingers of his left hand. He wrote a short note swiftly now, folded, sealed and addressed it and handed it to the servant.

"Have that delivered by a messenger at once," he directed. "There will be no written answer, I think; only something sent back—a photograph. See that it is brought to me at once."

He heard the servant's footsteps going rapidly away. He was shaking with anger, horror, resentment; he was almost—not quite—sure now of all that had taken place; of why Warden had been murdered, of what vague shape had moved behind and guided all that had happened since. He recalled Eaton's voice as he had heard it first on the train at Seattle; and now he was almost—sure—not quite—that he could place that voice, that he knew where he had heard it before.

He lay with clenched hands, shaking with rage; then by effort of his will he put these thoughts away. The nurse reminded him again of his need for food.

"I want nothing now," he said. "Have it ready when I wake up. When the doctor comes, tell him I am going to get up today and dress."

He turned and stretched himself upon his bed; so, finally, he slept.

CHAPTER XXI

The Man Hunt.

The rolling, ravine-gullied land where Harriet had left Eaton was wooded thickly with oaks, maples and ash; the glare from the burning bridge lighted the ravine for only a little way; Eaton had gained the bottom of the ravine beyond the point where this light would have made him visible and had made the best speed he could along it away from the lights and voices on the road. This speed was not very great; his stockinged feet sank to their ankles in the soft mud of the ravine; and when, realizing that he was leaving a trace easily followed even by lantern light, he clambered to the steep side and tried to travel along its slope, he found his progress slower still. In the darkness he stumbled sometimes full against the tree trunks or tripped on fallen branches which he could not see. Twice he fell headlong; and twice at its bottom, in soft earth, with his senses stunned, he remained for some minutes before he could collect himself to go on.

When he had been at it for an hour, only three-quarters of a mile, and had lost, by allowing for his zigzag of the ravine, at least half of it in distance from his pursuers, he climbed to the crest of the bank and looked back. He was not, as he had thought, half a mile from the road; he was not a quarter of a mile; he could still see plainly the lights of the three automobiles upon the road and men moving in the glare of those lights. He was certain that he had recognized the figure of Avery among these men. Pursuit of him, however, appeared to have been checked for the moment; he heard neither voices nor any movement in the woods. Eaton, panting, threw himself down to recover breath and strength to think.

There was no question in Eaton's mind what his fate would be if he surrendered to, or was captured by, his pursuers. What he had seen in Santoine's study an hour before was so unbelievable, so completely undemonstrable unless he himself could prove his story that he felt that he would receive no credence. Blatchford, who had seen it in the light in the study, was dead; Santoine, who would have seen it if he had had eyes, was blind. Eaton, still almost stunned and yet wildly excited by that sight, felt only, in the mad confusion of his senses, the futility of telling what he had seen unless he were in a position to prove it. Those opposed to him would put his statement aside with the mere answer that he was lying; the most charitably inclined would think only that what he had been through had driven him insane.

Eaton understood that his possibility of escape was very small, even if escape had been his only object; but Eaton's problem was not one of escape—it was to find those he pursued and make certain that they were captured at the same time he was; and, as he crouched panting on the damp earth, he was thinking only of that.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

The Best Ever.

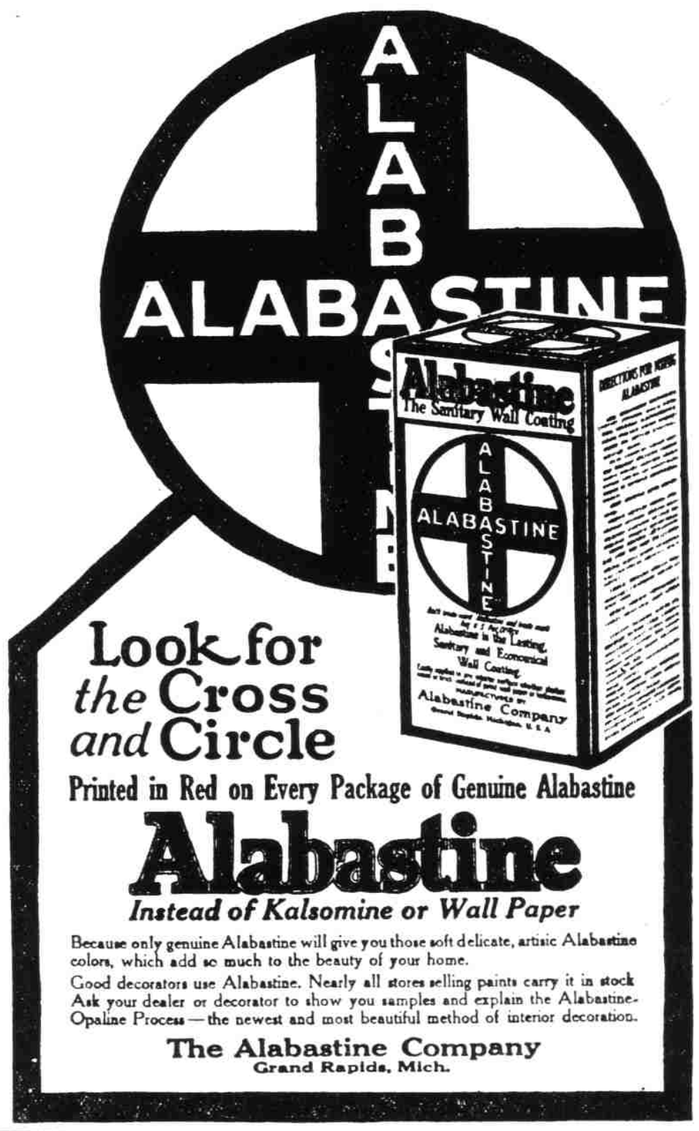
She was a little girl, and as they made their way in and out among the other couples she allowed her cheek to rest against his manly chest.

"Oh, Bill!" called out an irreverent youth as he sailed by.

"What?"

"That's a nice face you have on your watch."—Judge.

Nature must love a joke—judg' from the funny people we me



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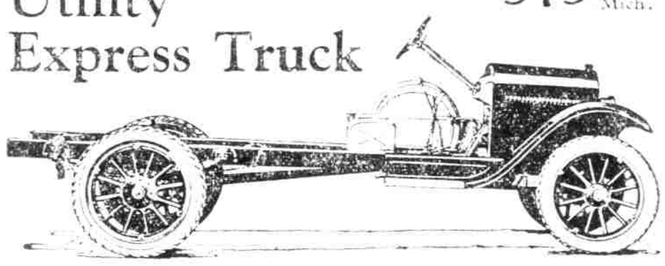

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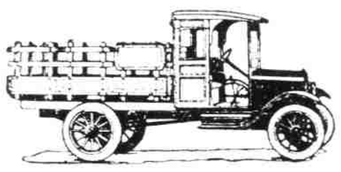

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