

“Clubnose”

A Study from Life

(From Chamber’s Journal)

It was in a hospital at the east end of London that I first made the acquaintance of “Clubnose.” An old college friend of mine, who was one of the resident surgeons, was showing me over the wards, and there passed us two or three times a hospital nurse, whose remarkable appearance arrested my attention. She had I think, the most hideous and repulsive face I ever saw on man or woman. It was not that the features were naturally ugly, for it was simply impossible to tell in what semblance nature had originally molded them; but they had been so completely battered out of shape, that one would have fancied she must have been subjected to much the same treatment as the figure-head on which Daniel Quilp used to vent his impotent fury. The hero of a score of unsuccessful prize-fights could not have shown worse facial disfigurement than this tidily dressed, cleanly looking woman.

When we had finished our tour of the wards, I turned to my friend, and pointing to the receding figure of the nurse, who had just passed us again, I said: “What a dreadful ill-looking nurse you have there! Why, it must be enough to send a patient into fits to have that face bending over him.”

“O!” said he, laughing, “that’s ‘Clubnose.’” Then lowering his voice, he added: “She’s not a nurse really—she’s a detective.”

“A detective!” I exclaimed. “Why, you don’t mean to say that the police dog the steps of a poor wretch even in the hospital?”

“No,” he replied; “I don’t think she has her eye upon any of the patients—it is the friends who come to visit the patients that she watches. It is her way of doing business. Whenever there has been a crime committed in a neighborhood, she goes out as a nurse to the hospital of the district. I don’t exactly know what her *modus operandi* is. She has a proper certificate as a nurse, and performs her duties like any of the rest; but it is understood that every facility for getting the information she requires is to put in her way, without of course exciting suspicion. How she picks up her information I don’t know, but I suspect it is by listening to the talk of the patients and their friends, on visiting days. At any rate, I believe she has obtained clues under this disguise when others have failed her; and if the game wasn’t worth the candle, I don’t suppose she’d try it.”

“Do the other nurses know her real character?”

“No. They may have their suspicions; but it is kept a secret from all but the authorities.”

“Is ‘Clubnose’ your nickname for her, or is she generally known by that *sobriquet*?” I asked.

“No; I did not christen her so; it is the name she is known by in the force. Her real name is Margaret Saunders. She has a very queer history, I believe; but she is exceedingly reserved, and I have never had a chance of drawing her out.”

And this was all I learned about “Clubnose” on that occasion.

Three or four days later two ladies, with whom I was intimately connected were robbed of a considerable quantity of valuable jewelry, and I was intrusted with the investigation of the case. I had paid numberless visits to Scotland Yard, and had had no end of interviews with detectives, but still there was no satisfactory clue to the identity of the thieves. One evening I was sitting alone after dinner, when the servant entered and said that “a person” wished to see me.

“Man or woman?” I asked.

“A woman, sir—says she wishes to see you in partickler, sir.”

“Well, show her in,” I said, inwardly wondering who the strange female might be who wanted to see me at so unreasonable an hour.

The door opened, and a respectable-looking woman wearing a thick veil was shown in. I requested her to take a seat. She did so; and as soon as the servant had retired and the door was closed, she threw back her veil and revealed the distorted features of “Clubnose.”

I remembered her in an instant; indeed who that had once seen that face could ever forget it?

“You have come from Scotland Yard?” I said, interrogatively.

“Yes, sir,” she answered, quietly. “I am Margaret Saunders, from the detective department.”

Her voice was harsh and unpleasant; but there was a firmness and decision about her manner, and a look of intelligence and resolution in her keen gray eyes, which at once inspired confidence. The bonnet she wore concealed to a certain extent the terrible disfigurement of her face; but even then the most reckless flatterer dared not have called her physiognomy prepossessing. It was not a bad face; but one could not look at it without a shudder, so frightfully was it mutilated. The nose in particular I noticed had been knocked into a grotesquely fantastic shape, thereby giving rise to the *sobriquet* by which she was familiarly known. She had come to inform me of a very important piece of evidence which she had discovered, and which, I say at once, led ultimately to the identification and conviction of the thieves. Into the details of the case I need not enter; it was only remarkable because it introduced me personally to “Clubnose,” and enabled me eventually to learn from her own lips the story of her life, which I purpose here briefly setting down.

Some five-and-twenty years ago a crime was perpetrated in London which was marked by such exceptional features of atrocity as to send a thrill of horror through the whole community. A middle-aged gentleman of eccentric habits was attacked in his own house, and not only beaten and left for dead, but mutilated in a peculiarly shocking manner. The miscreants also carried off

a considerable quantity of valuable property. The victim of this atrocious crime, strange to say, in spite of the horrible injuries he had sustained, was not killed outright, and though for weeks his life was despaired of, he eventually recovered, only, however, to be for the remainder of his days a helpless cripple.

For some time the police could find no clue to the perpetrator of this barbarous outrage; but at last suspicion was attracted to a woman who was known to have been occasionally employed about the house to do odd jobs of cleaning. A person answering to her description, it was discovered, had been seen leaving the house in company with a man on the day on which the crime was committed. Some minor circumstances tended to confirm the suspicion that this woman was implicated in the affair, and she was accordingly arrested and charged before a magistrate. After one or two remands, for the purpose of obtaining further proof, the magistrate decided that there was not sufficient evidence to justify him in sending the case for trial and the accused woman was discharged. That woman was Margaret Saunders. She had all along emphatically protested her innocence, and after her discharge, she vowed that she would never rest until she had proved it by bringing the real offenders to justice. The police, baffled by the failure of their charge against herself, were compelled to confess themselves completely at fault; from them, Margaret Saunders could expect no assistance. Alone and unaided she set to work upon her self-imposed task. At the very outset, when it seemed to her that every moment was of value, she had the misfortune to fall down a flight of steps and break her leg. This necessitated her removal to the hospital, and it was as she lay there chafing at the enforced delay and inaction, that there came to her the first ray of light to guide her on her search. In the next bed to her there was a woman who was also suffering from a severe accident. On visiting-day she heard this woman say in a low, anxious voice: "Is Robert safe?"

"Yes," was the reply, also in a woman's voice. "He's in Glasgow, ready to bolt, if necessary; but there'll be no need for that, the bobbies have chucked up the game, as they mostly do when they've failed to fix a charge upon the first person they spot—unless there's an extra big reward offered, which there ain't in this case."

How it was suddenly borne home to her that this "Robert" was the man she wanted, "Clubnose" told me she never could quite make out. It flashed upon her all of a minute, she said, and she never had a doubt of the correctness of the instinct that prompted her to the conviction. She lay and listened, but could catch nothing more. She got a good look, however, at the woman who was a visitor, and felt certain she should know her again anywhere. Before leaving the hospital, Margaret Saunders had scraped up a speaking acquaintance with the patient who was so anxious about "Robert," and learned enough to find out in what part of London she must look for information about the character and antecedents of the said "Robert." It was this incident, by the way, that suggested to her afterward the value of assuming the disguise of a hospital nurse.

The ingenuity with which she ferreted out the facts which eventually determined her to track "Robert" to Glasgow, was wonderful. And not less wonderful was her dogged patience. Even when she had run her quarry to earth and was convinced in her own mind that she had her hands upon the real criminal, she had to wait until she could piece the bits of evidence together, and above all, until the victim of the outrage, whose brain had been seriously affected by the injuries he had received, had sufficiently recovered his mind and memory to give some intelligible

account of the attack upon him. Even when he could do so, he professed himself exceedingly doubtful of being able to recognize or identify his assailants; he knew, however, there were two of them—a man and a woman.

It was nearly eighteen months after the perpetration of the crime before the patience and perseverance of Margaret Saunders were rewarded with sufficient success to justify her in communicating with the police. The Scotland Yard officials were at first hardly inclined to credit her; but her earnestness convinced them at last that there was “something in it.” Perhaps they were helped a little toward that conviction by the fact that she solemnly swore she would never finger a penny of the reward. “She had hunted this man down to clear her own character and set herself right with the world,” she said, “and not a farthing of the reward would she touch.” It is unnecessary to dwell upon the sequel. Suffice it to say that “Robert” was arrested, that his accomplice, who was the niece of the victim’s housekeeper, was subsequently taken also; that the pair were tried, convicted, and sentenced, the woman to ten years, the man to penal servitude for life.

Margaret Saunders was highly complimented by the Judge upon the sagacity and acuteness she had displayed, his Lordship observing that she was “a born detective.” The press too was loud in her praises; and a subscription was set on foot as an expression of the public admiration for the indomitable courage, resolution, and patience, and the extraordinary astuteness which had enabled her to bring two great criminals to justice.

The journal which had suggested and started the subscription deputed a member of its staff, well known as a master of the “picturesque” style, to interview Margaret Saunders and write up a sensational article upon her. He applied to the police for her address, and an inspector from Scotland Yard volunteered to go with him—Sir Richard Mayne, the then Chief Commissioner of Police, having expressed a desire that something should be done for Margaret Saunders to show the official appreciation of her conduct. The journalist and the inspector accordingly proceeded together on their visit to the heroine. They found Margaret Saunders among very unsavory society—in one of the lowest of the filthy dens that swarm about the London docks. Not a very inviting subject for interviewing, and but a sorry heroine for a sensational article. However, they did interview her, and she soon, in language more vigorous than polite, gave them her mind upon the proposed recognition of her services. She wouldn’t have anything to do with any subscription or reward—wouldn’t touch a farthing.

“Look ’ere,” she said, doggedly; “what I done I done for my own sake, and nobody else’s. I meant rightin’ o’ myself, and I have righted myself. That’s my business—not yours. I don’t want nobody’s money nor praise. Let ’em keep that to themselves. But I’ll tell you what,” she added, turning sharply to the inspector. “If you mean true by all them fine compliments——”

“Most certainly we do,” interposed the inspector.

“Well, then, I’ll tell you what you can do to show it.”

“What is that?” asked the inspector.

“Why, make me one o’ yourselves. If I’m as good as you say, I might be worth something in your line. Make me one o’ yourselves—a detective. That’s all I ask; and if you won’t do that, I don’t want to have nothing more to say to ye.”

It was a novel and startling proposition, and the inspector was somewhat taken aback by it; however, he faithfully promised to lay the matter before the authorities at Scotland Yard, and let her know the result; with that, he and his companion left her. The end of it was that her wish was granted. Margaret Saunders was duly enrolled as a female detective, and a most active and intelligent officer she proved herself to be.

That is in substance the strange history of “Clubnose’s” connection with the police, as she herself, told it to me. I questioned her also upon her professional career; but here she was more reticent; still, I gathered that it had been marked by many exciting adventures and hair-breadth escapes from death. I learned, for example, that she owed the horrible disfigurement of her face to the polite attentions of two water side ruffians whose lady companions she had been instrumental in consigning to the tender care of the jailor of Pentonville.

“They took it out of me werry hot,” she said, in her rough but undemonstrative manner. “I reckon they thought they had done for me, but bless ye, I’m tough, and they got their seven years apiece for me—though mind ye, the Scotland Yard folks would never let on as I was one o’ them. They was tried and convicted for assaltin’ of me as a ordinary person. The lawyers tried to make out as I was a policy spy; but they couldn’t prove it. But I had to keep clear o’ that district for a long while afterwards.”

I was curious to know how with such a remarkable physiognomy she was not recognized in a moment wherever she went, and I put the question to her as delicately as I could. I at once found that I had touched her hobby. If there was one thing that she prided herself upon more than another it was her power of disguising herself; and indeed I afterward learned from one of the inspectors that she had good reason for being proud of this accomplishment, for there was no one in the force who could compete with her in the cleverness and variety of her disguises. Twice, however, she admitted that her disguise had been penetrated, and on each occasion she nearly paid the penalty with her life.

On the first occasion, she was pitched out the window and had her leg broken. On the second—which happened not more than a year before my first introduction to her in her professional capacity—she had what she herself called “a precious narrow shave o’ bein’ sent to kingdom-come outright.” She had been for weeks on the trail of a very clever gang of thieves, and had actually been admitted a member of the fraternity, and wormed herself into their secrets, so perfect and artistic was her disguise.

On a certain evening it was agreed that the police were to swoop down upon the gang, acting on “information received” from “Clubnose.” On this evening it unfortunately happened that there was present for the first time an old member of the gang who had just got his ticket-of-leave. Whether “Clubnose,” through over-confidence in the perfection of her disguise, committed some indiscretion or not, she could not tell; but at any rate in some way the suspicions of the returned convict were roused. He communicated them privately to some of his “pals” —a rush was made

at “Clubnose;” she was overpowered, stripped of her disguise, and then “welled,” to use her expression, about the head and body with pokers, bars, legs of chairs, and any other available weapon, until she was left “a mass o’ jelly.” She contrived, however, before they knocked her senseless, to break the window and sound the whistle she carried. The police burst in, too late to save her from the vengeance of the thieves, but in time to make an important capture. They found “Clubnose” with her skull fractured, and with hardly a whole bone in her skin. The injuries to her skull were so severe as to necessitate the operation of trepanning, which was successfully performed; but, she said, she had never been herself since, and was constantly troubled with terrible pains in the head.

“Ay,” she added, with the rude kind of philosophy which was a curious trait in her character, “that was a gallus bad job, that was. They nigh done for me but it might ha’ been worse. Supposin’ now, they’d ha’ smashed me up afore I spotted their little game, eh? That would ha’ been somethin’ to grumble at.”

It was a worse “job” for poor “Clubnose” than she imagined. Within six months after my last interview with her she was dead; the cause of her death being an abscess in the brain, produced by the frightful injuries to her head on the occasion when “they nigh done” for her. She must have been missed in the force; for she was—as the Judge described her at the trial which first brought her remarkable qualities into prominence—“a born detective;” and it will be long before the police of this or any other country obtain the services of a woman possessed of the nerve, the astuteness, and the dogged resolution of “Clubnose.”—*Chambers’ Journal*

New York Dispatch, October 19, 1879
The Burlington [IA] Weekly Hawk Eye, March 25, 1880
Northern Ohio Journal [Painesville OH], April 24, 1880
The Milan [TN] Exchange, April 29, 1880
The Ohio Democrat, April 29, 1880
Iron County [MO] Register, May 6, 1880
The Janesville [WI] Daily Gazette, October 16, 1880