

A Dangerous Charge
by Mary Grace Halpine

It was the last night of the year, and a few congenial spirits had gathered in the bachelor apartments of a mutual friend to spend in cheerful song and story the few remaining hours of the old year's life.

Only one of the company had failed to add his share of these to the general entertainment.

"Come, Mortimer," said the host, "it's your turn now. If you can't sing, let it be a story. You that have travelled about so much ought to be able to tell something worth hearing."

A unanimous request that the host's suggestion should be carried out having been made, Mortimer commenced his story.

"It was as long ago as the year '45, when I was quite a young man, with very little experience of the world, though I thought I knew more than I do now, or am ever likely to know. For the last three years I had been head bookkeeper to a wholesale drygoods house in the western part of New York, enjoying in no small degree its esteem and confidence, which I fully appreciated, and did my best to deserve. With the desire to perform my duties well and acceptably, I had an additional incentive to stand high in the estimation of the firm in the form of the lovely daughter of its head partner, with whom I was madly, and, as it seemed then, hopelessly in love. It was not the absence of fortune and position that made me so faint-hearted, for I had heard Mr. Crofton, her father, say, more than once, 'that he didn't care how poor his son-in-law was if he wasn't poor in integrity, intelligence, energy and self-reliance.' I was conscious that he regarded me with an eye of favor; certainly I could not complain that he did not afford me ample opportunity to woo and win his daughter if I could. The chief difficulty in the way lay in the fact that I had a rival, who, having been longer in the field, had apparently obtained a footing in her favor that I despaired of ever being able to win. And then the fair Lucy herself was so shy and reserved with me. She always had a gay smile and merry word for Fred Harding, while to me she was so shy and silent that I never could gain courage to express my love except by looks, and the eagerness and persistency with which I sought her society. Had I been more versed in the way of women I should not have let this dishearten me so. As it was, my heart sometimes beat high with the hope of eventual success, her eyes grew so wondrously bright at my approach, and she blushed so prettily when I spoke to her.

"Fred Harding was a gentleman of leisure, and quite a favorite with the fairer portion of the community. He had plenty of money, which he spent freely, though where he obtained it was not so clear. He was a slender, smooth-faced chap, with soft, white hands, glossy curls, and carefully got up attire. I never liked him; though that is not strange, considering how completely he monopolized the society of my adored Lucy. He was always very civil to me, but there was no love lost on either side. There seldom is between two men in love with the same woman.

"One day Mr. Crofton called me one side, stating that he was going to give me a strong proof of his confidence in what he was pleased to term my good sense and integrity, by intrusting to me some important business, to which it would be inconvenient for him personally to attend. I will

not take up the time by describing the nature of this business, which has nothing to do with my story, merely saying that it necessitated my going into the interior of the State, and taking with me twenty thousand dollars.

“I was not a little proud that a mission of so much importance should be intrusted to me; wondering, in my elation, if Lucy knew how much confidence her father had in me, and inwardly resolving that I would perform it in a way that would fully justify his good opinion.

“I was to take the evening train. Just before starting I called at Mr. Crofton’s private office to receive the money and his parting instructions. I could scarcely believe that the small package handed me contained so large an amount. His last injunction to me was to put it in my breast-pocket; to keep my coat buttoned closely to the chin, and to avoid talking with strangers.

“I took the five-thirty train, travelling straight on, with only brief stoppages, for nearly four hours. Then we came to the junction, and, leaving the express, I took the accommodation train on another and less frequented road. There was a delay of about fifteen minutes, owing to the fact that we were obliged to switch off to let the express train pass. About five minutes before we started an old man entered, whose white hair and beard gave him a very venerable appearance. He had a woman with him who clung timidly to his arm.

“‘Do these cars go to Bolton?’ he said, addressing me.

“‘They do,’ I replied.

“‘Are you going as far as that?’

“‘I am going beyond it,’ I said.

“‘You’re in luck, Emily,’ said the old man, addressing the veiled woman on his arm. Here’s a gentleman that’s going right through Bolton, and will see that you don’t get off at the wrong place.’

“‘My daughter is not used to travelling,’ he added, turning to me, ‘and is just getting up from a serious illness. If you will kindly see that she makes no mistake, I shall be glad.’

“‘Certainly.’ I responded.

“Viewing with no little self-complacency this additional proof of the confidence that people seemed disposed to place in me, I removed my cloak from the vacant seat as a tacit invitation to my charge that she was at liberty to appropriate it if she chose to do so.

“Observing my movement, the old man said:

“‘Thank you, sir. Would you as soon let my daughter have the seat farthest from the window? She is so sensitive to the cold.’

“Then, as the young lady took the seat alluded to, he kissed her, saying:

“‘Good-bye, my dear child. Don’t talk; your lungs are still weak, you know. Give my love to your aunt and cousins, and write as soon as you are able.’

“As the cars moved on I stole a look at my fair companion—for fair she looked and young—from the glimpse obtained through her veil. She was dressed very warmly, having on, in addition to the long, loose cloak that fell to the floor, a large cape and scarf. On her head was the conventional bonnet of that day, and which had material enough in it for half a dozen of the style worn now.

“Her unnatural pallor was heightened by the blackest eyes and eyelashes that I think I ever saw, though, on account of her shyness and timidity, the latter veiled the former much of the time from view. She seemed entirely unfit to be out at that season of the year, being seized at one time with a paroxysm of coughing that quite alarmed me. To my inquiry if I could get her anything, she shook her head, and remembering her father’s caution to her, I said no more. Removing the cork from a small vial, whose peculiar odor I remember yet, she touched it to her lips. Whatever it was, it seemed to have the desired effect. Folding my cloak, I placed it on the seat back of her, and leaning her head upon it, she slept, or seemed to do so.

“I had not the remotest idea, or intention, of going to sleep, but I did. How long I slept I don’t know. I only know I awoke with a sense of suffocation, to which the fresh air that poured in from the open car-door was a welcome relief. The cars had stopped, which was, perhaps, the reason why I awoke. With a confused feeling in my brain that I could not account for, I watched the people going out, until the peculiar odor before alluded to, reminding me of my companion, I turned to see how she was faring. To my astonishment, she was gone.

“‘Can this be Bolton?’ I thought, springing to my feet, not a little mortified at my involuntary remissness. As I did so, I stumbled over a reticule, on which one of my feet had been resting, and which my fair charge had left behind her. Catching it up, I sprang from the cars. As I gained the platform I caught a glimpse of her hurrying along to the other side of the depot, where a long train of cars was standing. To my surprise she glanced back, as I called out to her, but did not slacken her speed. The train for which she was making now began to move, but springing up the steps with a quickness of motion for which I was entirely unprepared, she disappeared from view.

“As the train thundered past me, moved by a sudden impulse, I thrust my hand into my breast-pocket. The package was gone!

“Should I live a thousand years I shall never forget the sensation that came over me; the dismay, the horror that for a while benumbed every faculty. But it was not long before every nerve of my heart and brain was fully aroused and at work. Like a flash of lightning, by whom, and how I had been robbed, all was clear to me.

“In the meantime, the train I had left had gone on, and I stood in the gray dawn alone on the platform. I ascertained that the place was not Bolton, but Warwick; that the train taken by the

woman went by a more circuitous route in the same direction whence I had started; that it was a fast train, its first stopping place being a large manufacturing town forty miles back. I immediately resolved to take the next train to that place. On learning that it would be two hours before I could do this, I turned my next thoughts to breakfast, contriving, in spite of my anxiety, to make a tolerably substantial meal from the bountifully-spread table of the hotel opposite, and feeling ten per cent better in consequence.

“As I arose from the table, I thought of the little satchel that the woman had left behind her, either from her haste to escape, or because she feared from her haste to escape, or because she feared to wake me if she removed it from beneath my foot. Its contents surprised and puzzled me. Not on account of their extent and value, however. They consisted of a dickey, a pair of socks, a black neck-cloth—or tie, as it is now called—an odd glove and a handkerchief. Not an article of women’s apparel was in it. There was no name or initial on anything, with the exception of the handkerchief, on which were the letters F. H., worked in red silk. On shaking the satchel, to make sure that there was nothing more, a wad of crumpled paper dropped out. Unrolling it, I smoothed it out upon my knee. It proved to be part of a letter, that part on which the address was written in the days before envelopes were invented. The lower, right-hand corner was torn off, leaving the superscription to read thus:

‘FRED’K HAR—
‘Stock—’

“The last four letters formed the first syllable of Stockport, the town where I resided. On turning the paper, I found some penciled memoranda, which ran thus: ‘Bonnet, vail, cloak, scarf, gloves.

“As I recalled the face beneath that vail—the short, wavy hair, parted in the middle of the forehead, the arched eyebrows, the intense blackness of the eyes, which never once directly met my own, there flashed upon me the secret of the indefinable resemblance to some one I had seen, which had struck me at the first glance, but which made no particular impression on my mind at the time. It was just as clear to me now as twelve hours later. I had been robbed, not by a woman, but a man, and that man was Fred Harding! He was in the habit of lounging in and out the store, reading the papers and exchanging the news, and I had a distinct remembrance of his sitting by the stove, within hearing distance, when Mr. Crofton first mentioned the matter to me, though I thought nothing of it at the time.

“In less than ten minutes I was on my way back to Stockport. What my thoughts and feelings were during the journey would be difficult to describe, so conflicting were their nature. At one time I was strong in the belief that I should be able to circumvent the villains that had robbed me of more than life, and then my hopes were down at zero. I knew that Harding’s eagerness to win sweet Lucy Crofton made him jealous of the favor with which her father regarded me, and was convinced that his object was not simply money, but to ruin me in my employer’s estimation. The result would be the same, at all events. Unless I could get back the package, farewell to all my bright prospects, and the sweetest maiden in all the world to me.

“It was dusk when I reached Stockport, for which I was not sorry. I went directly to the hotel where I knew Harding boarded. ‘He had been out of town for the last two days,’ so the porter

told me, 'but had just got back.' Ascertaining the number, I proceeded to his room, and the door being ajar, I went in. Harding was not there; but the bright light and cheerful fire indicated that he was not far off, and I sat down and waited.

"I looked scrutinizingly around. On the chair near me lay an odd glove; the mate to the one in the satchel, as I found by comparing them. Another link in the chain of evidence.

"I had scarcely time to secure this and decide upon my course of action when Harding entered. I have not power to describe his astonished and dismayed look as he saw me. Quickly recovering himself, he advanced eagerly towards me.

"Ignoring the outstretched hand, I said sternly:

"Mr. Harding, here is the satchel you left behind you in the little masquerade you played last night. You acted your part well, but it is time to lay aside the mask now. In this satchel is an odd glove, the mate of which I found upon the chair yonder, and which may be of value to you. You can have it in exchange for the package you took from me.'

"Taken completely by surprise, and a coward at heart, the villain turned deadly pale.

"Will you give me twenty-four hours to leave town in?"

"Taking a revolver from my pocket I advanced one step nearer.

"Give me that package and you can have forty-eight hours; refuse, and you have not five minutes to live!"

"It was about his person, as I surmised, and without another word he gave it to me.

"Only waiting to make sure that it was the same, and had not been tampered with, I sprang down the stairs, two steps at a time, in my haste to catch the train that I knew would soon be due. Twenty minutes later I was on my journey again, feeling like a suddenly freed bird as I sped along.

"By travelling day and night, and taking brief times for rest and refreshment, I so nearly made up the time I had lost as to be able to bring my business to a satisfactory conclusion within the limits assigned me. On my return I found a good many of my friends and acquaintances considerably exercised on the subject of Harding's sudden and mysterious disappearance. I kept my own counsel, however; being more ashamed of the successful game that had been played on me, than by being able, by a fortunate combination of circumstances, to checkmate him in the end.

"It was not until Lucy had been my wife nearly a year, and I was junior partner of the firm, that I ventured to tell her father of his narrow escape from a serious loss, which, in its result, would have been more disastrous to me than to him, inasmuch as it would have involved the loss of the most precious of all my earthly possessions."

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