

## BLIND MAN'S BUFF

A Story

By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH.

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They had been talking some minutes over the phone—one of those protracted and intimate conversations in which girls delight and which drive to the point of frenzy the man who wishes to get the line in order to tell his wife that he is to take the 8 o'clock train for Chicago.

It was Hildegarda who broke in on her friend's account of Tuesday's german with a little dismayed shriek.

"Goodness! I didn't dream it was so late. I have an engagement in five minutes and I'm not half dressed."

"Who is it? Darrell?" It was not a question for the telephone, but Irene never allowed her discretion to stand in the way of her curiosity.

"Ye-es." The hesitating answer gave Irene the impression that her friend was blushing. Darrell's adoration of Hildegarda was the season's joke. It was, however, a very suitable match. Darrell was preposterously rich and not bad-looking.

"Too bad about Jack Carr, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you mean." Hildegarda's tone was suddenly icy.

"Why, you don't mean that you haven't heard of his accident?"

"Accident! What accident?"

"Bentley Boynton told me about it last evening. I supposed, of course, you knew; you and Jack used to be such friends. Some workmen dropped a bag of lime beside him and it burst and puffed up into his eyes and blinded him. Poor, dear fellow! But he's so plucky that I dare say he'll make a joke of it."

Hildegarda rang off abruptly. Her head went down on her arms. Tremors shook her bowed figure. Hot tears rained from her hidden eyes.

Jack and Hildegarda had been good friends. The worldly wisdom which belonged to their station in life, the tacit acceptance of the theory that every girl owes it to herself to marry money if she can, alone had kept them from being more. There had been times when the glowing eyes of the young man suggested an almost irresistible temptation to set at defiance the traditions of his class, and the flutter of the girl's heart had acknowledged some uncertainty as to her own course under such circumstances.

But Jack had kept his tongue in leash, even if his eyes had been less tractable, and had gone his way and left the field to Darrell, with his millions.

And now, never again would those dear eyes woo her. Never again would she watch from her window that lithe figure swinging down the street as if it walked on air. She saw him groping his way through unending darkness, with only sad memories to keep him company. And then on the desk beside her she saw Darrell's card, which the maid had just laid there.

No one has ever given an explanation of the fact that a woman's tenderness for one man is so likely to result in cruelty to another. But owing to this peculiarity of feminine psychology, Darrell's sole reward for a year's devotion was the hasty note the maid brought down five minutes later:

"I cannot see you this afternoon. And please do not come again till you are willing that I should be nothing more than your friend. HILDEGARDE DEVRIES."

"A lady to see me?" Jack Carr, sitting in his darkened room, with a shade over his eyes, betrayed no satisfaction at the prospect of companionship. "What's her name?"

"She didn't say, sir. She said to tell you that a friend would like to see you for a few moments."

"Oh, show her up. I'm not much to look at just at present; but anyway the room's too dark for her to see." His philosophy stood by him till a swish of skirts on the stairs suggested an idea so preposterous that his heart leaped. He put up his hand as if to ward off a blow. Then a voice said, "Jack!"

"Hildegarda!" He sprang forward,

stumbled over a footstool, and regained his balance and his self-control at the same moment. "I'm not quite used to this sort of blind man's buff," he said in a rather breathless voice. "You must find a chair, please. Awfully good of you to look me up, I'm sure."

Hildegarda was thankful that the room was dark. In the clear daylight her courage would have failed her.

"It wasn't good at all," she quavered, in an uncertain voice. "I just had to see you, Jack"—Her voice died away, and she regained it only by an effort. "Jack, tell me—was I mistaken in thinking that you used to care for me?"

The pause that followed seemed undurably long. "No," Jack said at last, in a voice unlike his own. "No, that was no mistake, God knows."

She breathed more freely now that the plunge was taken. Except for the dryness of her throat and her burning cheeks, she felt almost at ease.

"But I was mistaken about myself, Jack. I thought I could be satisfied with a great deal of money and a good social position and all that, and what I wanted all the time was you. I have money enough for both of us. I shan't give you a chance to remember your—blindness." She hesitated at the word, but took it gallantly, like a thoroughbred. "I'll be eyes to you, and sunlight—Oh, Jack, I'll make you happy in spite of everything."

He crossed the room and stood beside her. "Hildegarda!" he cried hoarsely. "You mean that you are ready to refuse Darrell, and marry me?"

"Mr. Darrell means well," Hildegarda acknowledged with an air of wishing to give everyone his due. But you're—Jack."

"You—you said something about my eyesight," faltered Jack. "Did you mean?"

Hildegarda caught his hand. "Oh, dearest, that was what opened my eyes! When I heard that you were blind, I couldn't bear it and then I knew perfectly well that I couldn't live without you."

He swept her to him and a blissful moment followed. But the mysterious sixth sense, which belongs to love, led Hildegarda to divine disquiet in her lover. She drew away palpitating. "Jack, are you sure that you haven't got over caring for me?"

He was so reassuring on this point that the scared color came back to her cheeks. "You're not worrying because you're not rich?" she rebuked him quietly. "Why, Jack, we can get along beautifully with what I have, even if I don't come in for a share of Uncle Enoch's money."

"It isn't that altogether, darling. You spoke about my eyes"—

She flung her arms about his neck. "My eyes are, yours from now on, dear. I'll never give you a chance to know that you've lost anything."

"You are an unselfish angel," said Jack with conviction. "But the truth is, dearest, that the matter has been a little exaggerated. It's been quite painful, you know, but the doctor thinks that in three weeks I can go back to the office again."

"Oh!" Horror turned Hildegarda rigid in his arms. "And I've proposed to you without any excuse."

Jack did not answer—verbally at least. But without the aid of speech, and in an incredibly short time, Hildegarda was convinced that no excuse was needed.