

**THE HEART OF A
WOMAN**

**BY
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CHAPTER I

WHICH TELLS OF A VERY COMMONPLACE INCIDENT

No! No! she was not going to gush!—Not even though there was nothing in the room at this moment to stand up afterward before her as dumb witness to a moment's possible weakness. Less than nothing in fact: space might have spoken and recalled that moment . . . infinite nothingness might at some future time have brought back the memory of it . . . but these dumb, impassive objects! . . . the fountain pen between her fingers! The dull, uninteresting hotel furniture covered in red velvet—an uninviting red that repelled dreaminess and peace! The ormolu clock which had ceased long ago to mark the passage of time, wearied—as it no doubt was, poor thing—by the monotonous burden of a bronze Psyche gazing on her shiny brown charms, in an utterly blank and unreflective bronze mirror, while obviously bemoaning the fracture of one of her smooth bronze thighs! Indeed Louisa might well have given way to that overmastering feeling of excitement before all these things. They would neither see nor hear. They would never deride, for they could never remember.

But a wood fire crackled on the small hearth . . . and . . . and those citron-coloured carnations were favourite flowers of his . . . and his picture did stand on the top of that ugly little Louis Philippe bureau . . . No! No! it would never do to gush, for these things would see . . . and, though they might not remember, they would remind.

And Louisa counted herself one of the strong ones of this earth. Just think of her name. Have you ever known a Louisa who gushed? who called herself the happiest woman on earth? who thought of a man—just an ordinary man, mind you—as the best, the handsomest, the truest, the most perfect hero of romance that ever threw a radiance over the entire prosy world of the twentieth century?

Louisas, believe me, do no such things. The Mays and the Floras, the Lady Barbaras and Lady Edithas, look beatific and charming when, clasping their lily-white hands together and raising violet eyes to the patterned ceiling paper above them, they exclaim: "Oh, my hero and my king!"

But Louisas would only look ridiculous if they behaved like that . . . Louisa Harris, too! . . . Louisa, the eldest of three sisters, the daughter of a wealthy English gentleman with a fine estate in Kent, an assured position, no troubles, no cares, nothing in her life to make it sad, or sordid or interesting . . . Louisa Harris and romance! . . . Why, she was not even pretty. She had neither violet eyes nor hair of ruddy gold. The latter was brown and the former were gray. . . . How could romance come in the way of gray eyes, and of a girl named Louisa?

Can you conceive, for instance, one of those adorable detrimentals of low degree and empty pocket who have a way of arousing love in the hearts of the beautiful daughters of irascible millionaires, can you conceive such an interesting personage, I say, falling in love with Louisa Harris?

I confess that I cannot. To begin with, dear, kind Squire Harris was not altogether a millionaire, and not at all irascible, and penniless owners of romantic personalities were not on his visiting list.

Therefore Louisa, living a prosy life of luxury, got up every morning, ate a copious breakfast, walked out with the dogs, hunted in the autumn, skated in the winter, did the London season, and played tennis in the summer, just as hundreds and hundreds of other well-born, well-bred English girls of average means, average positions, average education, hunt, dance, and play tennis throughout the length and breadth of this country.

There was no room for romance in such a life, no time for it. . . . The life itself was so full already—so full of the humdrum of daily rounds, of common tasks, that the heart which beat with such ordinary regularity in the seemingly ordinary breast of a very ordinary girl did so all unconscious of the intense pathos which underlay this very ordinary existence.

Vaguely Louisa knew that somewhere, beyond even the land of dreams, there lay, all unknown, all mysterious, a glorious world of romance: a universe peopled by girlish imaginings, and the sensitive, creating thoughts of poets, by the galloping phantasies of super-excited brains, and the vague longings of ambitious souls: a universe wherein dwelt alike the memories of those who have loved and the hopes of those who suffer. But when she thought of it all, she did so as one who from the arid plain gazes on the cool streams and golden minarets which the fairy Fata Morgana conjures on the horizon far away. She looked on it as all unreal and altogether beyond her ken. She shut her eyes to the beautiful mirage, her heart against its childish yearnings.

Such things did not exist. They were not for her—Louisa Harris. The little kitchenmaid at the court who, on Sunday evenings, went off giggling, her chubby face glowing with pride and the result of recent ablutions, on the arm of Jim the third gardener, knew more about that world of romance than well-bred, well-born young ladies ever dreamed of in their commonplace philosophy.

And Louisa Harris had always shut down the book which spoke of such impossible things, and counted herself one of the strong ones of the earth.

Therefore now, with Luke's letter in her hand, in which he tells her in a very few words that he loves her beyond anything on earth, and that he only waits the day when he can call her his own, his very own dearly loved wife, why should Louisa—prosy, healthy-minded, healthy-bodied Louisa—suddenly imagine that the whole world is transfigured?—that the hotel room is a kind of ante-chamber to heaven?—that the red velvet, uncompromising chairs are clouds of a roseate hue and that the bronze Psyche with the broken thigh is the elusive fairy who, with Morgana-like wand, hath conjured up this mirage of glorious visions which mayhap would vanish again before long?

She went up to the window and rested her forehead against the cool pane. She might be ever so strong, she could not help her forehead feeling hot and her eyes being full of tears—tears that did not hurt as they fell.

Outside the weather was indeed prosy and commonplace. Rain was coming down in torrents and beating against the newspaper kiosk over the way, on the roofs of tramways and taxi-autos, making the electric light peep dimly through the veil of wet, drowning, by its

incessant patter, to which the gusts of a November gale made fitful if loud accompaniment, the shouts of the *cochers* on their boxes, the rattle of wheels on the stone pavement, even at times the shrill whistle for cabs emanating from the porch of the brilliantly lighted Palace Hotel.

It was close on half-past six by the clock of the Gare du Nord opposite. The express from Ostend had just come in—very late of course, owing to the gale which had delayed the mail boat. Louisa, straining her eyes, watched the excited crowd pouring out of the station in the wake of porters and of piles of luggage, jabbering, shouting, and fussing like an army of irresponsible pigmies: men in blouses, and men in immaculate bowler hats, women wrapped in furs, clinging to gigantic headgear that threatened to leave the safe refuge of an elaborate coiffure or of well fixed gargantuan hatpins, midinettes in fashionable skirts and high-heeled shoes, country women in wool shawls that flapped round their bulky forms like the wings of an overfed bat, all hurrying and jostling one another in a mad endeavour to avoid the onrush of the innumerable taxi-autos which in uncountable numbers wound in and out of the slower moving traffic like the erratic thread of some living, tangled skein.

Just the every-day prosy life of a small but ambitious capital struggling in the midst of an almost overpowering sense of responsibility toward the whole of Europe in view of its recent great Colonial expansion.

Louisa gave an impatient sigh.

Even the strong ones of the earth get wearied of the daily round, the common task at times. She and aunt were due to dine at the

British Embassy at eight o'clock; it was only half-past six now and obviously impossible to sit another two hours in this unresponsive hotel room in the company of red velvet chairs and the bronze Psyche.

Aunt, in conjunction with her maid Annette, was busy laying the foundations of an elaborate toilette. Louisa was free to do as she pleased. She got a serviceable ulster and a diminutive hat and sallied forth into the streets. She did not want to think or to dream, nor perhaps did she altogether wish to work off that unusual feeling of excitement which had so unaccountably transformed her ever since Luke's letter had come.

All she wanted was to be alone, and to come out of herself for awhile. She had been alone all the afternoon, save for that brief half hour when aunt discussed the obvious over a badly brewed cup of tea: it was not that kind of "alone-ness" which Louisa wanted now, but rather the solitude which a crowded street has above all the power to give.

There is a kind of sociability in any room, be it ever so uncompromising in the matter of discomfort, but a crowded street can be unutterably lonely, either cruelly so or kindly as the case may be.

To Louisa Harris, the commonplace society girl, accustomed to tea fights, to dances and to dinner parties, the loneliness of this crowded little city was eminently welcome. With her dark ulster closely buttoned to the throat, the small hat tied under her chin, with everything on her weather-proof and unfashionable, she attracted no notice from the passers-by.

Not one head was turned as, with a long breath of delight, she sallied forth from under the portico of the hotel out into the muddy, busy street; not one glance of curiosity or interest so freely bestowed in the streets of foreign capitals on a solitary female figure, if it be young and comely, followed this very ordinary-looking English miss.

To the crowd she was indifferent. These men and women hurrying along, pushing, jostling, and scurrying knew nothing of Luke, nor that she, Louisa Harris, was the happiest woman on earth.

She turned back toward the Boulevard, meaning to take a brisk walk all along the avenue of trees which makes a circuit round the inner part of the town and which ultimately would lead her back to the Gare du Nord and the Palace Hotel. It was a walk she had often done before: save for one or two busy corners on the way, it would be fairly solitary and peaceful.

Louisa stepped out with an honest British tread, hands buried in the pockets of her serviceable ulster, head bent against the sudden gusts of wind. She did not mind the darkness of the ill-lighted, wide boulevard, and had every intention of covering the two miles in a little more than half an hour.

How the time sped! It seemed as if she had only just left the hotel, and already surely not a quarter of a mile away she could see glimmering the lights of the Place Namur, the half-way point of her walk.

She was in the Boulevard Waterloo where private houses with closed porte-cochères add nothing to the municipal lighting of the thoroughfare.

Trams had been rushing past her in endless succession: but now there was a lull. Close by her a taxi-auto whizzed quickly past and came to a standstill some hundred yards away, near the pavement, and not far from an electric light standard.

Louisa, with vacant eyes attached on that cab, but with her mind fixed on a particular room in a particular house in Grosvenor Square where lived a man of the name of Luke de Mountford, continued her walk. Those same vacant eyes of hers presently saw the chauffeur of the taxi-auto get down from his box and open the door of the cab, and then her absent mind was suddenly brought back from Grosvenor Square, London, to the Boulevard Waterloo in Brussels, by a terrible cry of horror which had broken from that same chauffeur's lips. Instinctively Louisa hurried on, but, even as she did so, a small crowd which indeed seemed to have sprung from nowhere had already gathered round the vehicle.

Murmurs of "What is it? What is it?" mingled with smothered groans of terror, as curiosity caused one or two of the more bold to peer into the gloomy depths of the cab. Shrill calls brought a couple of *gardiens* to the spot. In a moment Louisa found herself a unit in an eager, anxious crowd, asking questions, conjecturing, wondering, horror-struck as soon as a plausible and graphic explanation came from those who were in the fore-front and were privileged to see.

"A man—murdered——"

"But how?"

"The chauffeur got down from his box . . . and looked in . . . ah, *mon Dieu!*"

"What did he see?"

"A man . . . he is quite young . . . only about twenty years of age."

"Stabbed through the neck——"

"Stabbed?—Bah?"

"Right through the neck I tell you . . . just below the ear. I can see the wound, quite small as if done with a skewer."

"*Allons! Voyons! Voyons!*" came the gruff accents from the two portly *gardiens* who worked vigorously with elbows and even feet to keep the crowd somewhat at bay.

Louisa was on the fringe of the crowd. She could see nothing of course—she did not wish to see that which the chauffeur saw when first he opened the door of his cab—but she stood rooted to the spot, feeling that strange, unexplainable fascination which one always feels, when one of those great life dramas of which one reads so often and so indifferently happens to be enacted within the close range of one's own perception.

She gleaned a phrase here and there—saw the horror-stricken faces of those who had seen, the placid, bovine expression of the two *gardiens*, more inured to such sights and calmly taking notes by the light of the electric standard.

"But to think that I drove that rascally murderer in my cab, and put him down safe and sound not ten minutes ago!" came with the adjunct of a loud oath from the irate chauffeur.

"How did it all occur?"

The *gardiens* tried to stem the flow of the driver's eloquence; such details should first be given to the police. *Voyons!* But what were two fat *mouchards* against twenty stalwart idlers all determined to hear—and then there were the women—they were determined to know more.

Louisa bent her ear to listen. She was just outside the crowd—not a part of it—and there was no really morbid curiosity in her. It was only the call of the imagination which is irresistible on these occasions—the prosy, matter-of-fact, high-bred girl could not, just then, tear herself away from that cab and the tragedy which had been enacted therein, in the mysterious darkness whilst the unconscious driver sped along, ignorant of the gruesome burden which he was dragging to its destination.

"*Voilà!*" he was saying with many ejaculations and expletives, and a volley of excited gestures. "Outside the *Parc* near the theatre two bourgeois hailed me, and one of them told me to draw up at the top of the Galerie St. Hubert, which I did. The same one—the one who had told me where to go—got out, clapped the door to and spoke a few words to his friend who had remained inside."

"What did he say?"

"Oh! I couldn't hear and I didn't listen. But after that he told me to drive on to Boulevard Waterloo No. 34 and here I am."

"You suspected nothing?"

"Nothing, how should I? Two bourgeois get into my cab; I see nothing; I hear nothing. One of them gets out and tells me to drive on farther. How should I think there's anything wrong?"

"What was the other man like? The one who spoke to you?"

"*Ma foi!* I don't know. . . . It was raining so fast and pitch dark just outside the *Parc* lights—and he did seem to keep in the shadow—now I come to think of it—and his cap—he wore a cap—was pulled well over his face—and the collar of his coat was up to his nose. It was raining so, I didn't really see him properly. I saw the other one better—the one who has been murdered."

But the rotund *gardiens* had had enough of this. Moreover, they would hear all about it at full length presently. As for the crowd—it had no business to know too much.

They hustled the excited driver back on to his box, and themselves got into the cab beside it—the dead man, stabbed in the neck from ear to ear—the wound quite small as if it had been done with a skewer.

The *gardiens* ordered the chauffeur to drive to the commissariat, and Louisa turned away with a slight shiver down her spine and her throat choked with the horror of what she had only guessed.

CHAPTER II

ONCE MORE THE OBVIOUS

You don't suppose for a moment, I hope, that a girl like Louisa would allow her mind to dwell on such horrors. Mysterious crimes in strange cities—and in London, too, for a matter of that—are, alas! of far too frequent occurrence to be quite as startling as they should be.

A day or two later, Louisa Harris and her aunt, Lady Ryder, crossed over to England. They had spent five weeks in Italy and one in Brussels, not with a view to dreaming over the beauties of the Italian Lakes, or over the art treasures collected in the museums of Brussels, but because Lady Ryder had had a bronchial catarrh which she could not shake off and so her doctor had ordered her a thorough change. Bellaggio was selected, and Louisa accompanied her. They stayed at the best hotels both in Bellaggio and in Brussels, where Lady Ryder had several friends whom she wished to visit before she went home.

Nothing whatever happened that should not have happened; everything was orderly and well managed; the courier and the maid saw to tickets and to luggage, to hotel rooms and sleeping compartments. It was obviously their mission in life to see that nothing untoward or unexpected happened, but only the obvious.

It was clearly not their fault that Miss Harris had seen a cab in which an unknown man happened to have been murdered.

Louisa, with a view to preventing her aunt from going to sleep after dinner and thereby spoiling her night's rest, had told her of the incident which she had witnessed in the Boulevard Waterloo, and Lady Ryder was genuinely shocked. She vaguely felt that her niece had done something unladylike and odd, which was so unlike Louisa.

The latter had amused herself by scanning a number of English papers in order to find out what was said in London about that strange crime, which she had almost witnessed—the man stabbed through the neck, from ear to ear, and the wound so small it might have been done with a skewer. But, with characteristic indifference, London paid but little heed to the mysterious dramas of a sister city. A brief account of the gruesome discovery—a figurative shrug of the shoulders as to the incompetence of the Belgian police, who held neither a clue to the perpetrator of the crime nor to the identity of the victim. Just a stranger—an idler. Brussels was full of strangers just now. His nationality? who knows? His individuality? there seemed no one to care. The police were active no doubt, but so far they had discovered nothing.

Two men, the murderer and the murdered, engulfed in that great whirlpool known as humanity, small units of no importance, since no one seemed to care. Interesting to the detective whose duty it was to track the crime to its perpetrator. Interesting to the reporter who could fill a column with accounts of depositions, of questionings, of examinations. Interesting to the after-dinner talker who could expatiate over the moral lessons to be drawn from the conception of such a crime.

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