

# A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

## CHAPTER XVI.

We had lit fresh cigars from his own box, and as he sat in his big arm chair he lifted his glass to me merrily, expressing pleasure at our meeting.

"I hope," he added, "that we shall meet very often. But take my tip, my dear fellow, and don't fall in love with Mabel Anson."

Why he should emphasize this warning just as Channing had done struck me as very curious. It might be, of course, that he was in love with her himself, and regarded me as a possible rival. This, indeed, was the impression conveyed to me by his words, and it aroused within me a vague feeling of distrust. That quick sinister glance when I had been introduced still lingered in my memory.

"I can't think why you should so repeatedly warn me," I remarked, laughing with affected amusement. "It really isn't likely that I shall fall in love with her."

He made no response. He only puffed slowly at his cigar, and smiled cynically through the veil of smoke he created.

I replaced my cigar in my mouth—for my friend was evidently a connoisseur of Havanas, and this was an excellent one—but at that instant my tongue, as I twisted it in my mouth, came in contact with the cut end of the weed, and I felt pricked as if by some sharp point. Quickly I removed it and examined it closely, exclaiming—

"Do they wrap up needles in your cigars? Look!" And I passed it across to him, indicating where, protruding from the end, which I had chopped off with the cutter on my watchguard, was the tiny point of either a needle or a pin.

"Extraordinary!" he ejaculated, taking it from my hand and examining it carefully.

But ere a few moments had elapsed I felt a strange sensation creeping upon me; a curious chilliness ran down my spine, my tongue seemed swelling until it filled my mouth, and my brain felt aflame.

"God!" I cried, springing to my feet in alarm. "Why, I believe I'm poisoned!"

"Nonsense!" he laughed. His voice seemed to sound afar off, and his dog's face slowly assume an expression of evil as he sat opposite, intently watching me.

A sudden dizziness seized me; a spasm of sharp pain shot through all my limbs from head to toe; my senses reeled, I could see nothing distinctly. The man Hickman's ugly visage seemed slowly to fade in a blurred, blood-red mist.

At that same instant my blood was frozen by terror, for I felt convinced that this abrasion of my tongue had been planned by my companion's devilish ingenuity, and that upon that needle-point had been placed some baneful substance, the action of which was rapid and certain. I saw it all, now that it was, alas! too late.

With a wild cry I stretched forth both hands to steady myself, but, staggering, only clutched the air.

Then a strange and utterly unaccountable thing happened to me—stranger than has ever happened to any other living man.

## CHAPTER XVII.

I approach this and the following chapters of my secret personal history with feelings of amazement and of thankfulness that I should still be alive and able to write down the truth freely and without fear, for the events were certainly most remarkable and utterly mystifying.

In no man's history has there ever been such a strange, bewildering page as the one I am about to reveal to you. Reader, as I have taken you into my confidence, so also I tell you confidentially that I myself, an ordinary man, would never have believed that in this life of ours such things were possible, had I not myself experienced them, and personally endured the frightful agony of mind which they entailed. But I am writing down in black and white, upon these pages the solid unvarnished facts, fearless of contradiction, so that the whole of the strange truth shall be known, and that she who is dearest to me on earth may be adjudged by the world with fairness and with justice. For that sole reason I have resolved to relate this romance of real life, otherwise it would ever remain in that crumpled writing in that small portfolio, or secret dossier, as it is called, numbered, docketed, and reposing in the archives of the Ministry of the Interior of a certain European Power.

Well, I have written the truth here, so that all who read may judge.

Immediately after the slight abrasion of my tongue, caused by the scratch of the needle so cunningly concealed in the cigar, I must have lost all consciousness. Of that I have no doubt. The recollections I have are only the faintest ones, blurred and indistinct, like shadows in a dream. I remember shouting in alarm and fighting fiercely against the drowsiness and general debility which seemed

to overcome me, but all was with little or no effect. The last I remember was the ugly face of Hickman glaring evilly into mine. His hideous grin seemed to render his dog's face the more repulsive, and his laugh of triumph sounded in my ears harsh and discordant, showing plainly that the spirit of murder was in his heart.

At the same instant that I had made a movement towards him, I seemed to have received a stunning blow upon the top of the skull, which so dulled my senses that I was powerless to combat the curious godliness that seized me, and sank senseless upon the floor of that shabby room, helpless as a log.

The last thought that surged through my brain was the reflection that I was powerless in the hands of an enemy. My first estimate of this man Hickman had been correct, and I regretted that I did not allow my instinctive caution to overrule my desire to become on friendly terms with him. He had enticed me to that place with an evil purpose—possibly that I might share the same fate as did that young man on the fateful night at The Bollons.

The prick of an ordinary needle upon the tongue would never have created such an electrical effect upon me, therefore it was certain that the point had been smeared with some powerful drug or poison. The ingenuity with which the cigar had been prepared was shown by the fact that a needle placed within would, as the tobacco became moistened by the saliva, gradually work downward towards the tongue, while the heat at the further end of the needle would, of course, render liquid any coating placed upon it. Without doubt I had been the victim of a deeply laid plot, prepared with a cunning that seemed almost beyond comprehension.

The blank in my mind, caused by my sudden unconsciousness, did not appear to me to be of very long duration. All I know is that I was utterly ignorant of every event that transpired about me, and knew nothing whatever of any of the incidents which afterwards took place in that dark, obscure house, or elsewhere. And yet they must have been of a character absolutely unheard of.

I have said that the period of my benighted senses did not appear to be prolonged. Indeed, now on reflection in the calmness of the present, I am inclined to put down the lapse of time during which, in my estimation, I was lost to all knowledge of things about me at two, or perhaps three hours. Of course, it is difficult to fix time when we awaken after sleeping, except by the degree of light in the heavens. If it is still dark, it is always difficult to gauge the hour. So it was with me when, with a heavy, bruised feeling about the top of my skull, I slowly struggled back to a knowledge of the world.

My first thought as I opened my eyes was of Hickman. My second was a feeling of surprise that I had been unconscious so long, for while it was about two o'clock in the morning when my tongue had been pricked by the concealed needle, and my adversary had dealt me a crushing blow upon my skull as I had rushed upon him, yet straight before my eyes the sun was shining full upon the carpet, and the particles of dust were dancing in its golden rays.

Surely, I thought, I could not have remained unconscious for nearly twelve hours.

The pain in my skull was excruciating. I put my hand to the wound, and when I withdrew it found blood upon it. I felt a huge bump, but the abrasion of the skin was, I discovered, only slight.

At first my brain was confused and puzzled, as though my dulled senses were wrapped in cotton wool. At a loss to account for the time that had elapsed, I lay upon the carpet just as I was, in vague, ignorant wonderment. My eyes, dazzled by the bright sunlight, pained me, and I closed them. Perhaps I dozed. Of that I am not quite sure. All I know is that when I opened my eyes again the pain in my head seemed better, and my senses seemed gradually to recognize, appreciate, and perceive.

I was lying on my side upon the carpet, and slowly, with a careful effort involuntarily made by the march of intellect, I gazed around me.

The place was unfamiliar—utterly unfamiliar. I felt my head, and again glanced at my hand. No. There was sufficient proof that my skull had been injured, and that I was lying alone in that room with the bar of sunlight slanting straight before my eyes.

Gradually, and not without considerable difficulty—for I was still half-dazed—I made out the objects about me, and became aware of my surroundings.

My eyes were amazed at every turn. Whereas Hickman's apartment was a dirty, shabby lodging-house sitting-room of that stereotyped kind so well-known to Londoners, the place wherein I found myself was a rather large, handsomely furnished drawing-room, the two long windows of which opened out upon a wide lawn, with a park and a belt of high trees far beyond. From where I was I could see a wealth of roses, and

across the lawn I saw the figure of a woman in a white summer blouse. The carpet whereon I was stretched was soft and rich, the furniture was of ebony, with gilt ornamentations—I think French, of the Empire period—while close to me was a grand piano, and upon a chair beside it a woman's garden hat.

I looked at that hat critically. It belonged to a young woman, no doubt, for it was big and floppy, of soft yellow straw, with cherries, and had strings to tie beneath the chin. I pictured its owner as pretty and attractive.

About that room there were screens from Cairo, little inlaid coffee-tables from Algiers, quaint wood-carvings of the Madonna beneath glass shades, fashioned by the peasants of Central Russia, Italian statuary, and modern French paintings. The room seemed almost a museum of souvenirs of cosmopolitan travel. Whoever was its owner, he evidently knew the value of bric-a-brac, and had picked up his collection in cities far afield.

The door was closed, and over it hung a rich portiere of dark-blue plush edged with gold. The sculptured overmantel, in white marble, was, I quickly detected, a replica of one I had seen and admired in the Bargello, in Florence. One object, however, aroused my wonder. It was lying on the floor straight before me, an object in white marble, the sculptured arm of a woman with the index finger outstretched. The limb was of life-size proportions, and had apparently been broken off at the elbow.

I staggered unevenly to my feet, in order to further pursue my investigations, and then I saw, upon a pedestal close to me, the marble figure of a Phryne with its arm broken.

In the centre of that handsome apartment I stood and gazed wondrously around. My transition from that bizarre sitting-room in Chelsea to this house, evidently in the country, had been effected in a manner beyond comprehension. My surprising surroundings caused my weakened brain to reel again. I was without hat or overcoat, and as I glanced at my trousers they somehow did not seem to be the same that I had been wearing on the previous night.

Instinctively I felt that only by some extraordinary and mysterious means could I have been conveyed from that close-smelling lodging in Chelsea to this country mansion. The problem uppermost in my mind was the identity of the place where I had thus found myself recovering my senses, and how I got there.

My eyes fell upon the push of an electric bell. My position, lying there injured upon the carpet, demanded explanation, and without further hesitation I walked across and pressed the ivory button.

I heard no sound. The bell must have rung far away, and this gave me the idea that the house was a large one.

Intently I listened, and a few minutes later heard a footstep. The door opened, and an elderly man-servant, with grey whiskers, appeared in the entry asking—

"Did you ring, sir?"

"Yes," I answered. "Will you kindly inform me where I am?"

He regarded me with a strange, puzzled expression, and then, in a calm, he rushed forward to me, crying—

"Why, sir! You've hurt your head! Look! Your forehead with blood!"

His grey face was pale, and for an instant he stood regarding me open-mouthed.

"Can't you answer my question?" I demanded hastily. "I know that I've injured my head. I didn't call you in order to learn that. I want to know where I am."

The man's countenance slowly assumed a terrified expression as he regarded me, and then, without further word, he flew from the room as fast as his legs could carry him. I heard him shouting like a lunatic in some other part of the house, and stood utterly dumbfounded at his extraordinary behaviour. He had escaped from my presence as though he had seen an apparition.

A few minutes later, however, he returned, accompanied by a dark-haired, well-dressed man of about thirty, tall, rather good-looking, and apparently a gentleman. The instant the latter saw me he rushed forward, crying, in a voice of distress—

"Oh, my dear sir, whatever has happened?"

"My head," I explained. "It was that ugly-faced scoundrel Hickman. Where is he?"

"Hickman?" echoed the new-comer. "Hickman? Who's he?"

"Oh, it's all very well for you to pretend to know nothing about it," I cried angrily. "But I tell you that as soon as I'm able I'll apply for a warrant for his arrest on a charge of attempted murder. Last night he tried to kill me."

"I don't understand you," the stranger responded.

"I don't, of course, expect you to admit any complicity in the affair," I snapped. "You'd be a fool if you did. All I tell you is that an attempt has been made upon my life by a man to whom I was introduced as Hickman."

"Not in this room?"

"I hesitate."

"No, not in this room," I admitted. "It was in a house at Chelsea."

The young man exchanged meaning glances with the manservant.

"At Chelsea?" repeated the stranger. "In London?"

"In London,"

"Well, that's very curious," he remarked. Then, turning to the servant, said—

"Gill, go and fetch Doctor Britten at once. Say nothing of this to any one in the house."

"Yes, sir," answered the servant, who instantly withdrew.

"I'm perfectly competent to do that if you'll kindly oblige me with a little warm water, a sponge, and some clean linen."

"No, no," he urged. "Wait in patience until Britten comes. He'll be here in a moment. I saw him returning home only ten minutes ago."

"But how came I here?" I demanded. "He hesitated, regarding me with evident distrust, mingled with considerable alarm."

"I really don't know," he responded lamely.

"That's all nonsense," I cried, with more force than politeness. "Find myself here, in this room, wounded and weak through loss of blood, after having been half murdered, and then you have the cool impudence to deny all knowledge of how I came here. You're a liar—that's plain."

I had grown angry at this lame attempt of his to feign ignorance.

"You are extremely complimentary," he answered, coloring slightly.

"Well, perhaps you won't mind telling me the time. I find that that cunning scoundrel Hickman, not content with trying to poison me with a prepared cigar and striking me on the head in that cowardly way, has also robbed me of my watch and chain."

He glanced at his watch.

"It's half-past two," he answered abruptly.

"Half-past two! Then it happened more than twelve hours ago," I observed.

"I wish Britten would hurry," the young man remarked. "I don't like the look of that wound. It's such a very nasty place."

"Only a scalp wound," I said lightly. "Properly bandaged, it will be all right in a few days. There's fortunately no fracture."

"Well, you're a pretty mess, at any rate."

"And so would you be," I said, "if you had been entrapped as I've been."

His face seemed bloodless, as though the discovery of my presence there had caused him the utmost alarm. He fledged and glanced eagerly now and then towards the door.

At last I distinguished advancing footsteps, and there entered an elderly, dapper, white-bearded little man, whose general demeanor and buttoned frock-coat gave him the air of a medical practitioner. He held his silk hat in his hand and as he placed it down I noticed that his stethoscope reposed cross-wise in the lining.

"My dear sir! My dear sir! What's this?" he began fussily. "Come, sit down!" and he drew me towards a chair, and seated himself upon the edge of another close to me.

"My head has been injured. Examine for yourself."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, first regarding me fixedly, and then rising and examining my head. "A nasty scalp-wound, I see. He felt it carefully with his fingers, causing me a sharp twinge of pain. 'No fracture, no fracture. That's fortunate—very fortunate. It's not serious at all. I'm glad to tell you—nothing serious. How did it occur?'"

"I was struck, that's all I remember," I answered, turning to him and looking into his face.

"With something sharp-pointed, evidently," and he looked extremely puzzled.

"I don't know what it was."

"From what I can feel, I think you must have had a previous blow upon the same spot at some time or another. Do you remember it?"

"Not at all," I answered. "I once received a blow on the head by the kick of a horse, but it was at the side."

"Ah, perhaps this was a blow in infancy, and you don't recollect it."

Then, as he exchanged a strange look with the young man who stood eager and anxious at his side, his quick eyes suddenly fell upon the broken arm of the statue.

"Why, what's this?" he cried, a sudden light apparently dawning upon him. "Look here, there's blood and hair upon this marble finger. You've evidently struck your head against it in passing, and so violently as to break the marble. See?"

I looked, and there, sure enough, upon the outstretched index-finger of the marble hand was a trace of blood, to which two or three hairs still clung.

"We've solved the mystery!" he cried. "I must dress your wound, and then, my dear sir, you must rest—rest. It will do your head good, you know."

"But I was struck down last night by a man named Hickman in his rooms in Chelsea. He attempted to murder me."

"Yes, yes," he said, as though intentionally humoring me. "We've heard all about that. But come with me upstairs and let me dress your wound at once. Gill," he added, turning to the servant, "get me some luke-warm water at once."

Then he took my arm and led me upstairs to a well-fitted dressing-room, where he fussily washed and bandaged my head, while I sat silent, dazed, and wondering.

(To be Continued.)

## WORTH KNOWING.

Stranger—"Beg pardon, sir, but you have it in your power to do me a great favor and one that I will gladly repay. Bankrupt (sadly)—"I am afraid you have made a mistake. I am of no use to anybody. I have just failed for half a million, with no assets."

"So I heard."

"You know it, and yet you say I can be of service to you?"

"Yes, sir. I beg you will not refuse."

"But what can a miserable bankrupt like me do for anyone?"

"I want you to tell me, sir, how you got so much credit?"

"Don't ask for a stone and expect to get bread."

# ON THE FARM

## ADVANTAGES OF HAND SEPARATOR.

Prof. H. M. Bainer of the Colorado Agricultural College in discussing the advantages of the hand cream separator says: Authorities on the subject of farm dairying will agree that any farmer who milks five cows or more and is either selling the cream or making butter of it, needs a centrifugal hand cream separator to secure the best profits.

The hand cream separator working under favorable conditions, does not leave more than one-twentieth of a pound of butter fat in 100 pounds of skimmed milk. The gravity systems and dilution separator methods of securing the butter fat will leave under favorable conditions, from one-half to three-quarters of a pound of butter fat in 100 pounds of milk.

According to these figures, a farmer who uses a hand separator, and milks ten cows, which produce 60,000 pounds of milk a year, would lose in the skim-milk but 30 pounds of butter fat a year on the total amount of milk. By the other methods he would lose from 200 to 450 pounds a year. Figuring butter fat at 20 cents a pound there would be an annual loss of from \$34 to \$84 between the hand separator and the other methods.

Advantages of the Separator—Not only does the machine secure practically all the butter fat, but it delivers the skim-milk in a sweet, warm and undiluted condition ready to be fed to the calves. Very few dairy utensils are needed, as the milk is separated as soon as it comes from the cow, and the skim-milk is fed at once.

Less work is required to handle the milk in this manner than with the other methods.

The cream delivered from the separator is of uniform richness; it has had all the fibrous and foreign matter removed. The milk has not absorbed bad flavors and odors from standing around and the cream is in excellent condition for ripening. Thus there is a gain in the quality and quantity of butter obtained.

Not only is the centrifugal separator of advantage in the production of fine butter, but it is equally advantageous in the purification of milk and cream for direct human consumption. Dairies improve the quality of their milk very much by running it through the separator and then mixing the milk and cream before bottling.

The average farmer cannot afford to hand the whole milk to the creamery, even if he is with a hauling distance and the roads are good. The skim-milk often comes back in a cold, half-sour and contaminated condition, which is unfit for feeding purposes. Even if it does come back in good condition, it is impossible to feed it regularly, and it is far from being equal to hand separator milk. Too much time is required to haul it to the creamery compared to the length of time required to separate it at home by hand. The hand separator cream, by careful handling, need not be hauled to the creamery oftener than every other day during the summer and perhaps not oftener than once in three days during the winter months.

The average separator of standard or reliable make should last, with good care, for twelve or fifteen years, with very few repairs.

## DOES DAIRYING PAY?

I was talking with a man just a few days ago, who lives only a few miles from me, writes R. B. Rushing. We were talking on the subject of dairying, and he asked me the question, "does dairying pay?" In making this man a reply, knowing that he was a man that had always followed the method of his father of raising corn, wheat and oats to sell, and also knowing that he had almost exhausted the supply of plant food in his soil, I thought it best to rather show him instead of telling him, yes. Of course, that would have answered his question much easier, but perhaps he would not have realized the fact as well.

I called his attention to his joining neighbor farmer who is making the business of dairying an occupation. I said to him, "Your neighbor just moved to that farm eight years ago, and to my knowledge it was just as badly run down as your farm is. This fact, of course, you personally know, and at that time he was a man of limited means."

You know, when he first moved on that farm, you and several others rather thought he would make a failure, but instead of making a failure he has made a grand success, and he has just followed dairying all that time; his fields are yielding good paying crops of whatever he puts on them, and it is joining yours, and only just a few years ago was just as poor as yours. Why has this difference taken place? Just because he has followed a paying business. Instead of raising crops that are exhaustive to the soil, and selling them off the farm, he has raised those crops that would improve the fertility of his soil and at the same time make good dairy feed, and feeding the crops to his cows and returning all the manure back to the soil, and also instead of selling any feed he has bought a large amount of very rich feed for his cows and also returned the manure from that to his soil and in this way he has costantly built up his soil instead of exhausting it."

He has sold an article that would not take much fertility from the soil. A ton of butter will not take much if any more fertility from the soil than 100 pounds of hay or straw.