A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER VI.—(Continued).

"Good-bye," she cried. Then she became lost to me.

I told the cabman where to drive, and sat back in the vehicle, plunged in my own thoughts. I was like a man in a dream. Truly my night's experiences had been of a most extraordinary character. I had long heard and read of the many romances and tragedies enacted during the midnight hours in London, and now, by a mere accident, I had obtained personal knowledge of one, and had narrowly escaped losing my life. The mystery was most tantalizing. Feeling weak, I stopped at a public-house and had some brandy. Indeed, I felt so unwell that I sat in the bar-parlor fully half an hour before resuming my drive.

Suddenly I recollected that I might gather something from the cabman; therefore, pushing open the little trap-door in the roof, I inquired where he had taken me up.

"In Albert Road, Battersea, sir."

This surprised me, for I had no idea that I had been on the Surrey side of the river.

I explained to the man my blindness, and asked him to describe the lady who had put me into his cab.

"Well, sir," he said, "she was very pretty indeed, with grey eyes and darkish hair."

"She was good-looking—eh?"

"Yes, sir. I don't think I've ever seen a much prettier young lady."

I sighed. How tantalizing it was that my poor sightless eyes had been unable to gaze upon her.

"Describe her more closely," I urged. "I'm anxious to know exactly what she's like."

"She had lovely eyes, sir. Her hair seemed a bit untidy, but it was a pretty shade of dark brown. Her face seemed innocent-looking, like a child's. I was surprised to see like that."

"Like what?"

"Half-drowned like. She had on a black skirt that seemed soaking wet through and covered with mud. She looked in an awful plight, and yet her face was merry and smiling. She took another cab as soon as she parted from you, and drove after us across the Albert Bridge, and then down Oakley Street. There she stopped the cab to speak to some one."

"Who was it?" I asked eagerly.

"A woman. But I couldn't see distinctly. They were too far away, and turned-down Cheyne Walk, so I didn't see 'em any more."

"You say that her clothes were very dirty?"

"Yes, worse than yours, and great Scott! sir, they're bad enough. You'll want to send 'em to the cleaners when you get 'ome."

What the man said was perfectly true. The slime of the river emitted a sickening stench, but it fortunately served to conceal one thing, namely, the blood-stains upon my coat.

I laughed at this remark of his, but I had no intention to enter upon explanations.

"From her appearance did my companion lead you to believe that she was a lady "

"Oh yes, sir. There's no two opinions about that. She wasn't a shop-girl, or anything of that sort. By her manner you'd tell her as a lady among ten thousand."

"There was nothing noticeable about her whereby I might recognize her again? Try and recollect."

"No, sir," answered the man's voice through the roof of the cab. "She was a very beautiful young lady, and that's all I noticed."

"You'd know her again if you saw her?"

"I should just say I would," laughed the man. "When a chap sees a woman as lovely as she is it ain't likely he'll forget her, even though he may have a wife and 'arf a dozen kids at 'ome."

"You're smitten by her beauty, it seems," I laughed.

"Well, sir, not exactly. But I admire pretty faces, and hers is the prettiest I've ever seen."

"What's your name?"

"West, sir—Tom West. Number 67-432. I stand on the rank at Hyde Park Corner."

"Well, West," I said, taking a card out of my case, and handing it to him, "if you ever see that lady again, and can find out who and what she is, and where she lives, I'll give you a present—say twenty pounds."

"Twenty quid!" the man echoed, with a whistle. "I'd like to touch the oof, sir, and you bet I'll keep my weather eye open."

"As soon as you've found her, let me know, and the money is yours. You understand that's a bargain."

"Right you are, sir. I'll do my very best."

"If you only knew the driver of the cab she took after we parted you might, perhaps, learn something."

"That's just what I'm thinking," he said. "The man who drove her was, I believe, an old fellow that we know as 'Doughy,' but I'm not at all sure. However, as soon as I set you down I'll go and find him. A cabman is difficult to recognize on his box if he wears another overcoat, you see. That's why I'm not certain that it really was 'Doughy.'"

By the sharp descent of the roadway I knew that we were already in Essex Street, and a few moments later I paid the man West and was ascending the stair to my own chambers.

The enlistment into my service of this cabman, the only person who had seen the mysterious Edna, was, I congratulated myself, a very shrewd and clever commencement of the investigation which I intended, at all hazards, to carry out. A cabman perched upon his box, and driving hither and thither through the London thoroughfares, is afforded excellent opportunities for observation, and it seemed quite within the bounds of possibility that if constantly on the watch he might recognize her.

Indeed, my only means of tracing her was through the intermediary of this man, who had seen her and remarked upon her marvellous beauty. He seemed a sharp, witty fellow, and I therefore entertained every confidence in his efforts to earn the promised reward. He was now on his way to find his colleague, the old driver "Doughy, and if Edna had actually taken his cab I should, without doubt, soon be in possession of some information.

Thus, with a light step and reassured feeling, I ascended the stairs, wondering what old Mrs. Parker would say to my protracted absence, and how I should explain it to her. I took out my latch-key and opened the door.

As I entered the tiny lobby that served the dual purpose of hall and a place in which to hang coats, a startling sound broke upon my ears—the sound of a woman's cry.

In an instant I drew back. Fresh mystery greeted me. I stood there rigid, speechless, aghast.

CHAPTER VII.

The voice which greeted me was that of a woman surprised by my sudden entrance; and walking swiftly forward to investigate, I passed into my own dingy sitting-room.

"I have a visitor, it seems," I exclaimed, stopping short. "May I not know your name?"

There was no response. Instinctively I knew that the woman I had thus disturbed was still present in that room wherein I spent so many lonely hours. Her startled cry was sufficient to convince me that she was there for some secret purpose. What, I wondered, could it be?

"Speak," I urged. "Kindly explain your business with me, and the reason of your presence here."

Yet she uttered no word of response, and apparently did not move.

I advanced, crossing towards the window, where I believed she must be standing, but with a quick movement my mysterious visitor eluded me, passing me by so near that her warm breath fanned my cheek, and next instant she had escaped and slammed the outer door of my chambers.

I stood wondering. Her presence there was most extraordinary. The faithful Parker, too, was absent, a circumstance which aroused misgivings within me. Could this strange female visitor have entered the place with a false key; or was she a mere pilferer whom I had disturbed in her search for plunder? Numbers of female thieves haunt the London streets, and it seemed more than likely that she was one who had ascended the stairs on pretence of selling something or other.

At any rate, I had returned at an unexpected moment, or she would not have given vent to that involuntary cry of dismay. I groped about the familiar room in order to ascertain whether it were disordered, but could find nothing whatsoever out of place. I called Parker loudly by name, but all was silence save the quick ticking of the timepiece upon the mantelshelf.

The clock of St. Clement Danes chimed merrily, then slowly struck the hour. I counted, and found that it was eleven o'clock in the morning. How much had happened during the past fifteen hours! I had twice nearly lost my life, and had, moreover, allied myself with the mysterious, unseen, Edna, whose great beauty had caused even a phlegmatic cabman to gaze upon her in wrapt admiration.

Having cast aside my hat, I sank into my armchair, muddy and dirty just as I was. My head, where it had been struck in the accident, pained me considerably, and I felt that I had a touch of fever coming on. Yet all my thoughts were concentrated upon the future and what the curious alliance with my strange protectress might bring upon me. Surely no man had ever found himself in a more remarkable situation than I was at that moment; certainly no man could be more mystified and puzzled. Deeply I pondered again and again, but could make nothing of that tangled web of startling facts.

By no desire or inclination of my own I had fallen among what appeared to be very undesirable company, and had involuntarily promised to become the assistant of some person whom I could not see. The strange oppression that fell upon me seemed precursory of evil.

My wet clothes sticking to me chilled me to the bone, and, with a sudden resolve to shake off the gloomy apprehensions that seemed to have gripped my heart, I rose and passed into my own room to wash and get a change of clothing.

The prolonged absence of Parker caused me much wonder. She never went out unless to go into the Strand to purchase the diurnal steak or tri-weekly chop which constituted my chief sustenance; or, perhaps, on Sunday afternoon she would, on rare occasions, go "to take a cup o' tea" with her daughter, who was a music-hall artiste, and lived somewhere off the Kennington Road.

Having cleaned myself, I proceeded to dress the wound on my head, my own medical knowledge standing me in good stead, and when I had satisfactorily bandaged it and put on a dry suit of clothes, I groped about through the several small rooms which were my home. Nothing seemed disarranged, nothing missing—only the woman who had ever been so faithful to me and had treated me as tenderly in my helplessness as though I had been her own son.

In impatience I took a cigar, lit it, and sat down to wait. No doubt, when she returned I should find that she had been absent upon some errand connected with her not-over-extensive cuisine. Poor old soul, she never was much of a cook, and I always feared to order fresh dishes in consequence of the agonies of indigestion which I invariably suffered after partaking of them. She once, indeed, made me a blanc-mange, and flavored it with spirit of turpentine instead of extract of almonds. After that I was compelled to strike blanc-mange off my menu. Unlike all other laundresses, however, she had no partiality for Old Tom. The thought grew upon me that my promise to the mysterious Edna, whoever she might be, was a rashly foolish one, and must result in some very serious contretemps for me. I had willingly given up my liberty of action and become the instrument of a person who had, without doubt, imposed upon me. It seemed most probable, now that I reflected, that she was acting in concert with the man who had so cleverly practised deception upon me and led me to believe that he was a police-constable. That man, it now seemed plain, had followed me from the house of mystery, allowed me to wander sufficiently far to lose my bearings, and then got on in front of me so that I might approach and accost him. The whole affair had been carried out with amazing ingenuity, and every precaution had apparently been taken to conceal the remarkable tragedy. Yet the chief features of the affair which puzzled me was the motive in endeavoring to take my life in that cellar beside the Thames. I had surely harmed no one, and, being utterly ignorant of the house wherein the affair had taken place, and also knowing me to be blind, they certainly could not fear any revelations that I might make. It was an enigma which I strove in vain to solve.

The tantalizing darkness in which I existed drove me to desperation. Imagine to yourself my utter helplessness, and my chagrin when I reflected that could I but have looked upon my mysterious protectress and those who had fallen victims of the unknown assassin, how different would have been my position. The events all seemed like some hideous nightmare; yet now that I sit calmly writing this narrative, each incident comes back to me with a distinctness just as that which whetted my appetite for further explanation, and provoked within me a desire to have the truth at whatever cost.

That one could meet with such an adventure in London seemed almost beyond comprehension, yet when one remembers the many strange stories of crime which daily add horror to the pages of the newspapers, it does not seem so actually incredible as it at first appears. It has been calculated that for every murder discovered in our giant metropolis, three remain undiscovered, therefore the daily number of such crimes must be very much larger than is popularly supposed. Nevertheless, the circumstances of this midnight tragedy were from every point of view extraordinary, and being enveloped in that veil of mystery, were to me a puzzle which it behoved me, if possible, to solve.

At the opening of this narrative of remarkable facts I declared that the circumstances were stranger than those in which any other living man had been placed, and I here repeat that the truth will be found even more extraordinary than the actual occurrences as I have related them. Assuredly no detective-office ever had a more complicated enigma to solve than that which had fastened itself about me, and certainly in the annals of Scotland Yard there is no more curious romance than the one which I have here written—as subsequent chapters will show.

(To be Continued.)

THE BIGGEST PAWNSHOP

IT IS CONDUCTED BY THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT.

The Mont de Piete is Vast Institution—Many Curious Pledges Among Collection.

Perhaps the most curious pledge of all is a silver five-franc piece brought to the Mont de Piete by working people who, when they were married, had the coin blessed by the priest. It is only in hours of great distress that this is brought to the Mont de Piete, where four and a half francs are always lent upon it. The coin is invariably redeemed.

LIKE A BANK.

At closing time the doors are shut, as though the institution were a bank, and the books made up. The pledges are taken from their shelves, checked, and then placed in the headquarters waggon and driven off. Here they are examined, registered and put away upon miles of shelves, or in vast steel vaults, according to their size and value.

On the ground floor one may see even automobiles and things which no ordinary pawnbroker would even dream of accepting. There are thousands of bicycles chestnut roasters, perambulators, and even the furniture of married couples without children, who may have left Paris for a pleasure tour.

It is quite the thing, by the way, for students to leave cases of books, and workmen their tools, for safe-keeping. In this way not only are the charges of a storage company done away with, but the depositor actually gets an advance of money while his property is in safe keeping.

MUCH JEWELLERY.

On the first floor are rows of immense safes containing jewellery, and many pieces among them worth $50,000. For my lady knows, when she goes south to Nice or Mentone or to take the waters of Aix-les-Bains, that there is no place of safe-keeping like the Government Mont de Piete.

There are hundreds of thousands of watches, and simply miles of gold chains coiled up in cotton wool like hibernating snakes.

Storeys above contain the wearing apparel of a great city; then come indescribably "miscellaneous" regions, and highest of all one comes upon what the director sadly calls "the region of sorrow and privation." Here are the mattresses and bed clothing of the poor, parted with only when their owners are in desperate straits. All bedding, by the way, is most carefully disinfected by up-to-date and scientific hygienic machinery before being put away.

MANY RENEWALS.

The long vistas of walls are pigeon-holed for boxes and bundles. Each time a renewal is made a new ticket is stitched over the old one. Count these tickets and you will see how long the article had been there. I noticed one with ten tickets. There was another little bundle on which but three francs had been lent, and yet it was covered with a mass of tickets of many hues, because there is a color for each year.

About this little bundle, by the way, there is a story. Blaize, the director, noticing the smallness of the loan and the astonishing number of renewals, caused a letter to be written to the pledger, asking why the bundle had not been redeemed. The woman came to headquarters and explained she was too poor.

"It is very valuable to you, is it not?" M. Blaize asked curiously.

The poor woman burst into tears. "Ah, Monsieur," she sobbed, "it is the only thing I have to remind me of my mother." This was too much even for a French government official. The director promptly gave her back the bundle and paid for it himself. It contained merely an old dimity petticoat.

A QUEEN'S APARTMENTS.

Queen Alexandra's private apartments in Buckingham Palace are of a style befitting her exalted rank. The bedchamber is an immense room with a height of at least twenty feet. In the centre of one side stands the bedstead—a massive affair of carved mahogany. It stands so high from the ground that a cushioned step runs all round. Curtains are provided to enclose it entirely if necessary. In the room also are a large dressing-table and two huge wardrobes with plate-glass doors. Each wardrobe is fully ten feet high and twelve feet long. On one side of the bedchamber is another room, lined with wardrobes. On the opposite side of the bedchamber are the bathroom superbly fitted up with marble, onyx, and silver, and the boudoir, decorated in rose pink and moss green, with silk-hung walls. Near at hand are suites of apartments occupied by Princess Victoria and the Hon. Charlotte Knollys, her private secretary.

ARE YOU?

Are you half as anxious, neighbor,
When a fellow's down and out
To go down to him a-smiling,
And to help him right about,
As you are to climb the ladder
Where some lucky fellow stands,
And give him a cordial greeting
With the strength of both your hands?

Insurance Official—"Of what complaint did your father die?" Applicant—"The jury foud him guilty."

ON THE FARM

FEEDING EARLY-HATCHED PULLETS.

It has been held by some that, while early-hatched pullets make the best winter layers, extra early ones may not be so profitable, unless fed in a special way through the summer; that, if fed stimulating food, they are likely to lay a few small eggs, then molt prematurely, with great injury to their egg production; and that, therefore, they should be retarded during the summer, so that they may enter on the winter season in full vitality.

With the object of testing the truth of this statement, a series of experiments were conducted at Cornell Agricultural Experiment Station, and the results have just been issued in a bulletin, No. 249.

Four methods of feeding were resorted to. In the first pen, the pullets received a grain mixture morning and night in the litter, and wet mash at noon. In pen No. 2, the grain mixture was given morning and night in the litter, and dry mash was given in a hopper, open at all times. In pen No. 3, where the pullets were "retarded," (no stimulating mash being given), grain was fed morning, noon and night in litter, and beef scrap once a day in a trough. In pen No. 4 (also "retarded"), the grain mixture and beef scrap were fed in a hopper, open at all times. Grit, oyster shell, and water were kept before all the pullets constantly, and mangels and green bone at intervals. All of the pullets were also allowed, alternately, a grass run, from the time the experiment started—July 28th to Nov. 20th—then closed in pens, with wire-netting openings (cloth in cold weather) until March 20th. The experiment lasted for 364 days. The grain mixtures were composed of cracked corn, wheat and oats, from July 28th, 1906, to January 18th, 1907, and of the same, with the addition of buckwheat, from January 19th to February 16th, 1907. The mash mixture was made of corn meal, wheat middlings, beef scrap, wheat bran, alfalfa meal.

The results per hen for the 364 days were as follows: Pen 1, average, 121.4 eggs; pen 2, 129.3 eggs; pen 3, 110.7 eggs; pen 4, 107.5 eggs.

Observations re moulting, etc., weight of eggs, fertility of eggs, etc., were also made, and results were summarised as follows, with the caution, however, that they should in no case be regarded as final until verified by repeated experiments with vastly more fowls:

Forced pullets made a better profit than "retarded" pullets. They ate less food per hen, at less cost per hen, than "retarded" pullets; produced more eggs, of a larger size, and at less cost per dozen; gave better hatching results; made a greater percentage of gain in weight; had less mortality, and showed the first mature molt. The most prolific pullets, it was found, did not always lay the earliest

Hopper-fed dry mash gave better results in gain of weight, production of eggs, gain in weight of eggs, hatching power of eggs, days lost in moulting, mortality, health and profit per hen, than wet mash. Wet-mash and grain-fed pullets consumed slightly less food, at less cost, and produced eggs at slightly less cost per dozen than dry-mash and grain-fed pullets. Hopper-fed pullets ate more than hand-fed pullets. Pullets having whole grain, ate more grit and shell than those having a proportion of ground grain. Earliest producers did not give as many eggs in early winter. Early layers gained as rapidly in weight as those beginning later to lay. Prolicacy seemed to make but slight difference in weight of hen and of egg.

IMPURITIES IN AMERICAN SEEDS.

Of 1,217 samples of red clover seed secured in the open market for purposes of analysis by the United States Department of Agriculture, 405, or one-third, contained seed of dodder, and 424 contained traces of yellow trefoil seed.

Of 399 samples of alfalfa seed secured, 191, or about one-half, contained seed of dodder, 135 contained a trace of yellow trefoil, 120 contained a trace of sweet clover seed, and 16 contained a trace of burr-clover seed. Of the above impurities, the only noxious one is the dodder, but it is very serious indeed.

Of 64 samples of meadow fescue seed, 20 contained chess in amounts varying from a mere trace up to over nineteen per cent., 4 contained seed of rye grass, 5 were misbranded, 4 of them being Canade blue grass, 1 orchard grass, and the other a mixture of orchard grass and fescue.

Of 55 samples of Brown's inermis seed, 15 contained chess, 28 contained from 2 to 3 per cent. of the wheat grasses, several contained seed of meadow fescue, and one contained more than 24 per cent. of meadow fescue and rye grass.

Of 429 samples of Kentucky blue grass all but 8 contained Canada blue grass. In most of these samples, the trace of Canada blue grass found was immature seed, showing that it was harvested with the Kentucky blue grass seed. In 110 samples, Canada blue grass seed was found in quantities exceeding 5 per cent., 32 of these being Canada blue grass seed misbranded Kentucky blue grass.

While thanks to the Seed Control Act, 1905, the Canadian seed trade is on a better basis than that across the border, it is well for us to be acquainted with the commonest impurities in American seed, particularly in the case of alfalfa. Dodder, in especial, is a pestiferous weed, and cannot be guarded against too vigilantly.