A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER XIII.

The face of Mabel Anson, my newfound friend and idyll, had in that instant changed. Her countenance was pale as death, while the hand holding the small pencil trembled.

"Whence did you obtain this?" she demanded in an awe-stricken tone, which showed plainly that she recognized it. She held her breath in expectancy.

What could I reply? To explain the truth was impossible, for I had pledged my honor to Edna to preserve the secret. Besides, I had no wish to appal her by the strange story of my midnight adventure. Hence a lie arose involuntarily to my lips.

"I found it," I stammered.

"Found it? Where?"

"I found it when groping about during the time I was blind, and I've carried it ever since, wondering whether one day I should discover its owner."

"It is extraordinary!" she gasped — "most extraordinary."

"You appear to recognize it," I observed, much puzzled at her attitude. "If you can tell me to whom it belongs I will return it."

She hesitated, and with a quick effort regained her self-control.

"I mean it possesses an extraordinary resemblance to one I have seen many times before—but I suppose there are lots of pencil-cases of the same shape," she added with affected carelessness.

"But there is a curious, unintelligible cypher engraved upon it," I said. "Did you notice it?"

"Yes. It is the engraving which makes me doubt that I know its owner. His initials were not those."

"You speak in the past tense," I observed. "Why?"

"Because—well, because we are no longer friends—if you desire to know the truth;" and she handed me back the object, which, with the dress-stud, formed the only clue I had to the identity of the unfortunate victim of the assassin.

There was something in her manner which was to me the reverse of convincing. I felt absolutely certain that this unimportant object had, in reality, been identified by her, and that with some hidden motive she was now intentionally misleading me.

"Then you do not believe that this really belonged to your friend?" I asked, holding it up to her gaze.

"No," she answered quickly, averting her face as though sight of it were obnoxious. "I feel certain that it did not. Its resemblance is striking—that's all."

"It would have been a remarkable coincidence if it really were the property of your friend," I said.

"Very remarkable," she admitted, still regarding me strangely. "Yet the trite saying that 'The world is small' is nevertheless very true. When I first saw it I felt certain it belonged to a gentleman I knew, but on closer examination I find it is older, much more battered, and bears initials which have evidently been engraved several years."

"Where did your friend lose his?" I inquired, reflecting upon the lameness of her story. The mere recognition of a lost pencil-case would never have affected her in the manner that sight of this one had if there were not some deeper meaning attached to it.

"I have no idea. Indeed, I am not at all sure that it is not still in his possession."

"And how came you to be so well acquainted with its aspect?" I asked, in eagerness to ascertain the truth.

She hesitated for a few moments. "Because," she faltered—"because it was a present from me."

"To an admirer?"

She did not answer, but even in that dim lamplight I detected the tell-tale flush mounting to her cheeks.

Then, in order, apparently, to cover her confusion, she added—

"I must really go. I shall be late for dinner, and my mother hates to wait for me. Good-bye."

Our hands clasped, our eyes met, and I saw in hers a look of deep mystery, as though she held me in suspicion. Her manner and her identification of that object extracted from the pocket of the dead man were very puzzling.

"Good-bye," I said. "I hope soon to have the pleasure of meeting you again. I have enjoyed this walk of ours immensely."

"When we meet—if ever we do," she answered with a mischevious smile, "remember that I have promised to wear the mask. Good-bye." And she twisted her skirts gracefully, entered the cab, and a moment later was driven off, leaving me alone on the kerb.

I hesitated whether to return home by bus or Underground Railway, but, deciding on the latter, continued along the High Street to the station, and journeyed to the Temple by that sulphurous region of dirt and darkness known as the "Inner Circle."

The reader may readily imagine how filled with conflicting thoughts was my mind on that homeward journey. Although I adored Mabel Anson with a love beyond all bounds, and would on that evening have declared my passion for her had I dared, yet I could not disguise from myself that sight of the pencil-case I had taken from the dead unknown had wrought an instant and extraordinary change in her.

She had identified it. Of that fact there was no doubt.

Her lame explanation that it bore a resemblance to the one she had given to her friend was too palpably an afterthought. I was vexed that she should have thus attempted a deception. It was certainly true that one gold pencil-case is very like another, and that a Birmingham maker may turn out a thousand of similar pattern, yet the intricate cypher engraved on the one in question was sufficient by which to identify it. It was these very initials which had caused her to deny that it was really the one she had purchased and presented; yet I felt convinced that what she had told me was untrue, and that those very initials had been placed upon it by her order.

Again, had she not spoken of its owner in the past tense? This, in itself, was a very suspicious circumstance, and led me to the belief that she was aware of his death. If he were dead, then certainly he would no longer be her friend.

Her sudden and abject amazement at seeing the pencil in my hand; her exclamation of surprise; her eagerness to examine it; all were facts which showed plainly that she knew that it remained no longer in his possession, and was yet dumbfounded to find it in my hand. Had she not also regarded me with evident suspicion? Perhaps, having identified her present, she suspected me of foul play?

The thought held me petrified. For aught I knew she might be well aware of that man's tragic end, and the discovery of part of his property in my possession was to her evidence that I had committed murder.

My position was certainly growing serious. I detected in the rather formal manner in which she took leave of me a disinclination to shake my hand. Perhaps she believed it to be the hand of the murderer. Indeed, my declaration that I had found that incriminating object was in itself sufficient to strengthen her suspicion if, as seemed quite probable, she was aware of her friend's tragic end. Yet I had really found it. It was no lie. I had found it in his pocket, and taken it as a clue by which afterwards to identify him.

Now, if it were true that the man who had been struck dead at my side was actually Mabel's friend, then I was within measurable distance of elucidating the mystery of that fateful night and ascertaining the identity of the mysterious Edna, and also of that ruler of my destiny who corresponded with me under the pseudonym of "Avel."

This thought caused me to revert to that hour when I had sat upon the seat in the Park, keeping a tryst with some person unknown. Seated in the corner of the railway-carriage I calmly reflected. More than a coincidence it seemed that at the moment my patience became exhausted, and I rose to leave the spot my mysterious correspondent had appointed for the meeting, I should have come face to face with the woman whose grace and beauty held me beneath their spell. For some purpose—what I knew not—I had been sent to that particular seat to wait. I had remained there in vain, smoking a dozen cigarettes, reading through my paper even to the advertisements, or impatiently watching every person who approached, yet the moment I rose I encountered the very person for whom I had for days past been in active search.

Had Mabel's presence there any connection with the mysterious order which I had obeyed? Upon this point I was filled with indecision. First, what possible connecting link could there be between her natural movements and the letter from that unknown hand? As far as I could discern there was absolutely none. I tried to form theories, but failed. I knew that Mabel attended at the Royal Academy of Music, and what was more natural than that she should cross the Park on her way home? Her way did not lie along the path where I had kept such a watchful vigil, and had I not risen and passed towards Grosvenor Gate at that moment we should not have met. There, indeed, seemed no possible combination between the request I had received from my unknown correspondent and her presence there. In my wild imaginings I wonderer whether she were actually the woman whom in my blindness I had known as Edna, but next instant flouted the idea.

The voice, the touch, the hand, all were different. Again, her personal appearance was not at all that of the woman described by West, the cabman who had driven me home after my strange adventures.

No; she could not be Edna.

As the train roared through the stifling tunnels Citywards, I strove to arrive at some decision. Puzzled and perplexed at the various phases presented by the enigma which for ever grew more and more complicated, I found any decision an extremely difficult matter. I am not a man given to forming theories upon insufficient evidence, nor jumping to immature conclusions, therefore I calmly and carefully considered each fact in its sequence as related in this narrative. The absence of motives in several instances prevented any logical deduction. Nevertheless, I could not somehow prevent a suspicion arising within me that the appointment made by my anonymous correspondent had some remote connection with my meeting with the woman who had so suddenly come into my life—a mere suspicion, it is true, but the fact that no one had appeared to keep the appointment strengthened it considerably.

Whenever I thought of Mabel, recollections of Channing's strange admonition arose within me. Why had he uttered that warning ere I had been acquainted with her a few hours? To say the least, it was extraordinary. And more especially so as he refused to give any explanation of his reasons.

The one dark spot in my life, now that I had recovered my sight, was the ever-present recollection of that midnight tragedy. Its remembrance held me appalled when I thought of it. And when I reflected upon my own culpability in not giving information to the police, and that in all probability this neglect of mine had allowed the assassin to escape scot-free, I was beside myself with vexation and regret. My thoughts for ever tortured me, being rendered the more bitter by the reflection that I had placed myself in the power of one who remained concealed, and whose identity was inviolable.

As I declared in the opening of this narrative, it seems almost incredible that in these end-of-the-century days a man could find himself in such a plight, surrounded by mysterious enemies, and held in bondage by one unknown and unrevealed. Laboriously I tried to unravel the tangled skein of events and so extricate myself, but, tired with the overtask, I found that the mystery grew only more inscrutable.

The woman I loved—the woman to whom I had fondly hoped some day ere long to make the declaration of the secret of my heart—had discovered in my possession an object which might well be evidence of a foul and cowardly crime. I feared—indeed, I felt assured—that her sweet sympathy had, in an instant been turned to hatred.

I loved her. I adored her with all the strength of my being, and I knew that without her my life in the future must only be an aimless blank. In the sweetest natures there can be no completeness and consistency without moral energy, and that Mabel possessed it was plainly shown. In her confidences with me as we traversed the Park and Kensington Gardens she had shown, with the most perfect artlessness, that she had that instinctive unconscious address of her sex which always renders a woman doubly charming. Persons who unite great sensibility and lively fancy possess unconsciously the power of placing themselves in the position of another, and imagining rather than perceiving what is in their hearts. A few women possess this faculty, but men never. It is not inconsistent with extreme simplicity of character, and quite distinct from that kind of art which is the result of natural acuteness and habits of observation—quick to perceive the foibles of others, and as quick to turn them to its own purpose; which is always conscious of itself, and if united with strong intellect, seldom perceptible to others.

In her chat with me she had no design formed or conclusion previously drawn, but her intuitive quickness of feeling, added to her imagination, caused her to half-confide in me her deep sorrow. Her compassionate disposition, her exceeding gentleness, which gave the prevailing tone to her character, her modesty, her tenderness, her grace, her almost ethereal refinement and delicacy, all showed a true poetic nature within, while her dark, fathomless eyes betrayed that energy of passion which gave her character its concentrated power.

Was it any wonder, even though she might have been betrayed into a momentary lergiversation, that I bowed and worshipped her? She was my ideal; her personal beauty and the tender sweetness of her character were alike perfect. Therefore my love for her was a passion—that headlong vehemence, that fluttering and hope, fear and transport, that giddy intoxication of heart and sense which belongs to the novelty of true love which we feel once, and but once, in our lives.

Yet I was held perplexed and powerless by her unexpected and unacknowledged indentification of that clue to the unknown dead.

(To be Continued.)

WILLING TO BE CONVINCED.

A sturdy tramp one day went into a garden, where the lady of the house was engaged in attending to the flowers. He took no notice of her refusal to give coppers, but continued his importunity until a bull-dog appeared, growling ominously. The lady seized it by the collar and held it, calling out:

"You had better go away at once; he may bite you."

"You ain't got no right to keep a savage dorg like that," replied the tramp in outraged tones.

"Perhaps I have not," was the cool answer. "If you think so, I won't keep him—I'll let him go."

The latch of the gate clicked violently and in twenty seconds that tramp had vanished into space.

SAFE MEASURE.

Wise Father (to married son)—"You're living very comfortably, I see, but are you saving any money?"

Wise Son (whisperink)—"Yes; but don't tell my wife."

GATHERING INDIA RUBBER.

Interesting Facts in Regard to the Industry in the Amazon Region.

India-rubber has a curious history in the arts. Its common name was given to it because it was first used for removing pencil marks from paper. It is produced in most tropical lands. The use of it has increased until it has become one of the most important forest products of the world. It has become in many parts of the world an article of cultivation, but the native forests of the Amazon basin and of the Congo, in Africa, are still the source of the world's greatest supply. The quantity has been greatly increased in later years, for the production has been stimulated by an advance in price. Interesting facts in regard to the industry in the Amazon region are given by one who is a native of the country and familiar with its productions.

As the steamer moves along, the traveller on the Amazon, or on any of its numerous navigable tributaries, will notice little wisps of smoke rising from the banks of the river. The smoke, which is quite characteristic of the most fertile river-banks, indicates the places where the natives are treating the sap of the rubber-tree to prepare it for the market.

The business of collecting and preparing rubber is carried on extensively in the valley of the Amazon. There are districts of from forty to fifty square miles owned and operated by one person. The rubber-trees are scattered more or less plentifully among other trees that yield no profit as yet.

When a man has secured a large tract of forest land for the industry, he puts up a rough shelter upon it, and engages all the Indians of the neighborhood, men and women, to help him in the work.

They start out early in the morning to make the rounds of the estate, for they must get back to the riverside before the heat of the day becomes too great. They tap the trees afresh if they need it, attach the little tin cups for catching the sap, and bring home whatever sap may have been collected.

The sap of the rubber-tree is a perfectly white liquid of the consistency of goat's milk. It is necessary that it be converted into a solid. This is effected by the action of a pungent smoke which coagulates, or curdles, the milky fluid. For this use the seeds of two different kinds of palm are employed. Nothing else will answer the purpose.

The seeds are put in an earthen jar which has a narrow neck, the bottom of which is perforated with a number of square holes. In this the palm nuts are burned; the holes in the bottom of the jar admit a draft and cause a dense smoke to issue from the neck. This is the smoke seen from the deck of the steamer.

The operator takes a paddle similar to that with which he paddles his canoe and holds the blade of it over the jar. Upon it he pours the milky juice, cup by cup, all the time turning the blade so as to bring all parts of it into the smoke. The fluid is instantly fixed, and adheres to the wood or to the rubber already formed. This process goes on until a solid lump is formed that will weigh perhaps sixteen pounds.

When the lump has grown large enough for handling, a slit is cut in it, and the blade is drawn out. A mass of rubber is left ready for exportation. It is the smoke used in coagulating the sap that gives crude rubber the dark appearance which is familiar.

The natives who collect the rubber have little use for the article at home. They have no pencilings to erase, wear no rain-coats, have no mills to be supplied with belting, nor automobiles that require rubber tires. They do, however, make playthings for their children by pouring the sap into clay molds of birds, animals and fishes, and then crushing the clay and removing it.

CHINESE TO SAVE FORESTS.

School of Forestry Soon to be Opened —Where Wood is Scarce.

The Chinese are saving their forests. The almost world-wide movement to protect and establish forests has reached the Celestial Empire, and the first Chinese school of forestry shortly will be opened in Mukden.

The Chinese realm sometimes is pointed out as the worst example among modern nations of forest destruction. The floods which periodically are poured down from the denuded mountains are destructive beyond comparison with those of any other country, and the want of forests is assigned as the chief cause.

Wood is scarcer in China than in almost any other inhabited region of the world, although the country is well adapted to the growing of trees. In the establishment of a forest school the Chinese Government gives evidence that it realizes the need of beginning its reforestation in a scientific manner.

OLD-FASHIONED KIND.

Old fashioned man!
Simple his plan,
Plain at a glance.
Pays what he owes;
Nothing he knows
Of high finance.

To put away
Something each day
Is his design.
Not very slick;
Getting rich quick
Not in his line.

Old fashioned man!
Head of a clan,
Happy his life.
Kids all about,
Rosy and stout,
And just one wife!

ON THE FARM

CLOD CRUSHING.

No implement on the farm is more effective and useful in the process of reducing the land to a fine tilth than the roller, if used at the right time. The right time, however, is not after harrowing, as is too often the case, but before, and, as a rule, the same day the plowing is done, after a few hours' exposure to the sun or wind, and before the land has begun to bake. The use of the roller at this period will crush the lumps to a considerable extent, and will also render the harrowing much more effective, thus saving time and labor, while making a much more satisfactory job, and also bringing the furrow slice into close contact with the subsoil, thereby assisting the upward capillary movement of soil moisture, and facilitating the decomposition of the inverted sod. The mistake of plowing a whole field before attempting to refine the soil is yet a far too common practice, as one cannot help noticing in travelling through the country. The result is that the moisture in the land escapes, the soil is baked and hardened, and the implements used for reducing it to a suitable condition for a seed-bed have little effect, while a great deal more time and labor is required to get it into satisfactory condition than would have been necessary had it been attended to at the proper stage. It would appear to be far more sensible, as a rule, to stop plowing an hour or two before the end of the day and hitch to the roller, and then the harrows, leaving that part of the field in good condition to hold the moisture and remain in a desirable state. Of course, judgment has to be used in this matter, as in all others in farming, for if the land is heavy clay, and a little on the wet side when plowed, it would not be wise to roll or harrow immediately after the plow, and a day or perhaps two days of drying may be necessary to get the land in good condition for the fining process, but that it no good reason why it should be left to bake like bricks.

Useful as the roller is as at present made and used in this country, we have a strong conviction that it might be greatly improved and made much more useful if, instead of being made with a smooth surface, it were constructed with a corrugated or disk-like surface, which would more surely and thoroughly crush and break up clods, instead of merely crowding them into the looser earth, as is too generally the case. In England, effective clod-crushing rollers are in use, made up of a series of steel rings, strung upon an axle and acting independently; and in the Unied States, disk rollers and corrugated rollers are manufactured for the purpose of bringing the soil into the best condition for seeding at a minimum cost of time and labor, while leaving the land with a loose surface, and so retaining the moisture much more perfectly than when left with a compacted and smooth surface. Farmers have learned from experience that certain crops, such as roots and corn, grow faster and stronger, and yield more bountifully, when the surface soil around them is kept loose by frequent stirring, even in dry weather, but too many appear to fail to understand that the loose soil acts as a mulch, arresting the escape of moisture by breaking the capillary tubes by which the moisture is carried from the lower soil to the surface, thence evaporated into the air. A proper soil condition is one in which the soil is friable, yet firm, up to within two or three inches of the surface, so that moisture may be drawn up to render the feeding range of the plant-roots quite moist. In order to prevent the escape of this moisture by evaporation, the surface layer should be as loose and dry as it can be made. Hence we perceive the wisdom of following the roller promptly with the harrow or some other implement calculated to produce a fine loose surface mulch.

VALUE OF HUMUS.

1. Humus is decaying vegetable matter in the soil.

2. It is the storehouse of nitrogen, the most expensive and the most necessary of all plant foods.

3. It contains the food upon which the soil organisms live, whose function is to convert organic nitrogen into nitrates in order to be available for the use of plants. It materially assists in decomposing the mineral constituents of the soil, such as potash and phosphoric acid, making them available for the use of plants.

4. It increases the power of the soil to hold water without becoming waterlogged.

5. It makes clay soil more open and friable. It serves to compact sandy soil and increase its drouth-resisting power.

6. It prevents washing to a great extent; thereby diminishing the loss of fertility by that cause.

7. Soil filled with humus more readily admits the air so necessary to all useful plant growth.

8. There appears to be a distinct relationship between the amount of humus in the soil and the amount of available nitrogen therein. It has been observed that when it is absent from the soil, there is a distinct reduction of the ability of that soil to grow crops. Hence in practice in order to obtain the best crops we have to resort to barnyard manure rather than the use of concentrated fertilizers.

UNFORTUNATE.

It is unfortunate that people do not have the same faculty for getting out of trouble that they have for getting out of work.