A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER XIX.

"My dear Wilford!" exclaimed the thin-faced, angular woman, "I really think you must have taken leave of your senses."

"My dear madam," I cried excitedly, "I haven't the slightest notion of your name. To the best of my knowledge, I've never had the pleasure of meeting you before this moment. Yet you have the boldness to assert that you are my wife! The thing is absolutely preposterous!" I laughed cynically.

"You must be mad to talk like this!" the woman answered with some asperity.

"I tell you that I'm not mad, madam," I protested, "and further, I declare that I have never married."

"What rubbish you talk!" she said. "This accident to your head has evidently affected your intellect. You must rest, as Doctor Britten has ordered."

"The doddering old idiot thinks, like yourself, that I'm not quite responsible for my actions," I laughed. "Well, we shall see."

"If you were in your right senses you would never deny that I am your wife," answered the over-dressed woman. "The thing's too absurd."

"My dear madam," I cried, growing angry, "your allegations are utterly ridiculous, to say the least. All this is either some confounded conspiracy, or else you mistake me for somebody else. I tell you that I am Wilford Heaton, of Essex Street, Strand, a bachelor who has neither thought nor inclination of marrying."

"And I tell you that you are Wilford Heaton, my husband, and owner of this house," she answered, her face growing redder with excitement.

The situation was certainly stranger than any other in which a man could possibly be placed. That it was no dream, but a stern reality, was entirely plain. I glanced around the comfortable library, and saw there evidences of wealth and refinement, while through the window beyond my gaze fell upon the wide park sloping away to a large lake glistening in the sunshine, and through the trees beyond could be seen a distant glimpse of the blue waters of the English Channel.

I stood utterly nonplussed by the startling declaration of this artificial-looking person, who aped youth so ridiculously, and yet spoke with such an air of confidence and determination.

"And you actually expect me to believe this absurd story of yours, that I am your husband, when only last night I dined at The Boltons, and was then a bachelor? Besides, madam," I added with a touch of sarcasm, for I confess that my anger was now thoroughly aroused, "I think the—well, the difference in our ages is sufficient to convince any one that——"

"No, no," she hastened to interrupt me, as though that point were very distasteful to her. "Age is entirely out of the question. Am I to understand that you distinctly deny having made me your wife?"

"I do, most decidedly," I laughed, for the very idea was really too ridiculous to entertain.

She exchanged a pitying look with Gedge, who stood at a little distance, watching in silence.

"Poor Wilford! poor Wilford!" she ejaculated in a tone of sympathy, and, addressing the man who called himself my secretary, said, "It seems quite true what the doctor has declared; the blow has upset the balance of his mind."

"Madam," I cried very determinedly, "you will oblige me by not adding further insult to your attempted imposture—for such sympathy is insulting to me."

She clasped her hands, turned her eyes upward, and sighed in the manner of the elderly.

"You believe that I'm mad. Therefore you are trying to impose upon me!" I went on furiously. "But I tell you, my dear madam, that I am just as sane as yourself, and am fully prepared to prove that I am not your husband."

"Ask Mr. Gedge whether I speak the truth or not," she said, turning to the secretary.

"Certainly," answered the man addressed, looking straight into my face. "I have no hesitation whatever in bearing out Mrs. Heaton's statement."

"It's all humbug!" I cried, turning savagely upon him. "I don't know this woman from Adam."

"Well," he laughed cynically, "you ought to know her pretty well, at any rate."

It was apparent from his tone that he had no very high opinion of her.

"I'm pleased to say that until this present moment we have been strangers," I said, for I was not in a humor to mince words.

"You are extremely complimentary, Wilford," she observed resentfully.

"It appears to me that compliments are entirely unnecessary in this affair," I said. "You are endeavoring to thrust yourself upon me as my wife, in order, I suppose, to achieve some object you have in view. But I tell you once and for all, madam, that any such attempt will be futile. To speak plainly, I don't know you, neither have I any desire to add you to my list of acquaintances."

"Well," she cried; "of all the stories I've ever heard, this is the most extraordinary!"

"I think, madam, I may say the same," I remarked coldly. "Your story is the wildest and most incredible that I've ever heard. Last night, as a bachelor, I dined with friends in Kensington, and left at a late hour, calling at a house in Chelsea on my way home to Essex Street. To-day I awake to be told that I am the owner of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice; master of this house—in Devonshire, I believe, isn't it; and your lawful husband. Now, if you think me capable of swallowing such a pack of palpable fictions as these, you must certainly consider be absolutely insane, for none but a madman would give credence to such a tissue of lies."

"Doctor Britten considers that your brain is unbalanced, because you do not know the truth," she said calmly. "I quite agree with him."

"He's a fool—a drivelling idiot," I cried, forgetting myself in the heat of the moment, and using an unwritable word. Mention of that pottering old fossil's name was to me as a red flag to a bull. "I surely know who and what I am!" I cried.

"No, my dear Wilford, that's just it. You don't know who you are," the woman answered with a smile.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "Then perhaps you'll kindly inform me. All this may be very amusing to you, but I assure you that to me it's the very reverse."

"I can only tell you who you are as I know you to be," answered the powdered-faced, doll-like old lady, whose attempts at juvenile coquetry sickened me.

"Go on," I said, preparing myself for more attempts to befool me.

"I ask you first whether you are not Wilford Heaton, of Heaton Manor, near Tewkesbury?"

"Certainly."

"And you were once stricken by blindness?"

"That is so unfortunately."

"And you are now carrying on business as a financier in the City of London?"

"I know nothing of finance," I answered. "This Mr. Gedge—or whatever his name is—has told me some absurd fairy-tale about my position in London, but knowing myself, as I do, to be an arrant duffer at figures, I'm quite positive that the story is all bunkum."

"Then how do you account for these memorandum forms," inquired Gedge, taking some from the table, "and for these letters? Are they not in your hand-writing?"

I glanced at the letters he held. They referred to some huge financial transaction, and were certainly in a hand that appeared wonderfully like my own.

"Some one has been imposing upon you, I tell you. This is a case of mistaken identity—it must be, my dear sir."

"But I tell you it isn't," protested Gedge. "All that your wife has said is the absolute truth."

"My wife!" I cried angrily. "I have no wife—thank Heaven!"

"No, no," whined the painted old woman, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief, very lightly, however, so as not to disturb their artificiality. "No, don't say that, my dear Wilford, don't say that! You know that you are my husband—you know you are!"

"I know, my dear madam, quite well that I do not occupy that distinguished position," I responded very firmly.

"But I can prove it—I can prove it!" she cried with a futile effort at tears.

"Then I shall be most interested to see this extraordinary fiction proved," I said. "Perhaps we shall then get down to facts."

"The facts are as already stated," Gedge remarked.

"Then let me see proof. There must be a certificate or official entry somewhere if what this lady says is really correct. Where is it?"

"My certificate was stolen when my jewel-case was rifled in the train between Waterloo and Exeter," she answered. "But, of course, a copy can easily be obtained. Your solicitor in London can get a copy at once from Somerset House."

"Certificate stolen!" I cried. "A most ingenious excuse. I quite anticipated it, although it, unfortunately, exhibits no originality. Thieves don't usually steal marriage certificates. They can't pawn them, you know."

The woman before me glanced around the room with an air of bewilderment, and I then knew that I had cornered her.

"And where did this extraordinary marriage between us take place, pray?" I inquired, not without some bitter irony.

"At St. Andrew's, Wells Street."

"Wells Street, in London?"

"Yes. You surely remember it, don't you? The church is close by Oxford Circus."

"I know the church quite well," I answered. "But I most firmly and distinctly deny ever having been inside it in my life."

"If you examine the marriage register there you'll find your signature, together with that of your wife," Gedge observed, with a confidence that rather surprised me.

"I shall certainly take no trouble in such a matter," I declared. "It is alleged that I am the husband of this lady, therefore it is for her to bring proof—not for me to seek it."

"Very well, then," cried the woman who called herself Mrs. Heaton. "Within three days a copy of the certificate shall be placed in your hands."

"I'm not very partial to copies of documents," I observed very dubiously. "I always prefer originals."

"The original is, unfortunately, lost."

"Stolen, or strayed away of its own accord—eh?" I added with a doubtful laugh.

"Are you content to wait until the certificate can be obtained from Somerset House?" she inquired.

"No," I responded. "If you are actually my wife as you allege, madam, perhaps you will kindly explain the mystery of my presence here, in a house that until an hour ago I had never seen in all my life."

The woman and the secretary again exchanged glances. I saw they considered me an utterly irresponsible agent. They believed me to be demented.

"None of us can explain it," Gedge answered. "There is some mystery, but what it is we can't yet fathom."

"Mystery!" I echoed. "I should think there was some mystery—and devilishly complicated it must be, too, when I find myself in this amazing position. Why, it's sufficient to turn the brain of any man to be told of one's marriage to a—to a woman one has never set eyes upon before, and—well, old enough to be his own mother!"

"Hush, hush!" said the secretary, who apparently wished to avoid a scene. He evidently knew that this angular woman, notwithstanding her affected juvenility, possessed a fiendish temper. I had detected it by the keen look in her eyes and the twitchings of her thin, hard lips.

"If 'm in my own house," I cried wrathfully, "I am surely permitted to say what I like. Am I master here, or not?"

"Certainly you are, sir," he responded, instantly humbled.

"Then listen," I said. "Until the arrival of the certificate from London I have no wish to meet this lady who alleges that she is my wife."

Then, turning to her, I made her a mock bow, adding ironically—

"I think, madam, that it will avoid any further words of a disagreeable nature if we remain apart for the present."

"Certainly, Wilford," she cried, putting her hands out to me with an imploring gesture. "Go and rest, there's a dear, and carry out Doctor Britten's orders. You will soon be right again if you do. You've been puzzling your head too much over your figures, and the blow has affected you. Go and rest. But before you go I would ask you one favor."

"Well?" I inquired in a hard voice.

She drew nearer to me, and with that detestable artificial coquetry lifted her face to mine that I might kiss her.

"No!" I cried roughly, for I was beside myself with anger. "Let me remain in peace. I don't want to meet you again, my dear madam, until—until I know the worst."

"What have I done, Wilford, that you should treat me thus?" she wailed bitterly, bursting into a torrent of tears. "Oh, what have I done? Tell me."

"I don't know what you've done, and I'm sure I'm not interested in it," I responded. "All I know is that when you declare that you are my wife you tell a deliberate and downright lie."

For a moment she stood in hesitation, then, with tears flowing fast, she covered her face with her hands and staggered from the room.

Was she only acting the broken-hearted wife, or was that emotion real. Which, I could not decide.

If all this were part of some conspiracy, it was certainly one of no ordinary character. But what a confounded old hag the woman was! I shuddered. Surely she could not be my wife! The suggestion was too utterly preposterous to be entertained for a single moment, and within myself I laughed her allegation to scorn.

(To be Continued.)

RATTLED.

"Hear about Reggie?"

"What's the latest?"

"Well, you know how bashful he is?"

"Yep. Get on."

"The other night he proposed to Miss Coyne. Of course, he got all balled up. He thought the proper thing would be to get on his knees to her."

"Yes."

'So he did. Well, he hadn't been on his knees since he was a kid. And, rattled as he was, he couldn't think a thing to say but 'Now I lay me down to sleep!'"

ROCKY.

Mr. Wiggins, in his study, was endeavoring to concentrate his thought upon a bit of writing. A perpetual noise in the flat above annoyed him beyond human endurance. Rushing into the sitting-room he cried.

"What is that confounded racket?"

"My dear, it is only the lady above rocking her baby to sleep."

"For heaven's sake, run and tell her to use smaller rocks!"

ON THE FARM

PREPARING LIVE STOCK FOR THE RING.

In the various live stock departments there is a certain class of professional exhibitors who need no instruction regarding the preparation of animals for the show ring. Some of them have certain methods of feeding and ways of handling live stock for rounding them off for exhibition purposes. It is impossible to secure a detailed description of their methods. As a rule, many breeders take their cattle direct from the pasture to the fair. A few weeks before the fair the cattle are brought in daily and kept up for a short time until they become accustomed to their feeds. In this way they are not disturbed by the sudden change when transferred from the pasture to the fair grounds stall. With plenty of good chopped hay in sacks, the exhibitor will be able to do so adjust the meal and cut feeds in sacks to the needs of the animals so that they may be kept on their proper feed and in good tone. Good alfalfa and clover well cut, makes one of the most satisfactory cut feeds.

Care should be taken not to over crowd the animals with food on the way to the fair. Frequently the appetite slackens in transportation and experience shows that it is better to keep them under, rather than overfed. The feed given them during transit should be dry rather than possessing too much succulence. It is a well known fact that some animals will not take much water when on the road hence the necessity of care in this respect. The individuals should be watched. The more nearly they can be kept and fed as they were when at home the better.

Animals should not be washed until they are thoroughly rested after their journey. The facilities for washing, include soap, brushes, buckets and plenty of fresh water. It is important that this work be pushed rapidly. Animals are taken to the fair for show purposes and the oftener they are in the show the better for the individual who shows them. After animals have been thoroughly washed, they should be groomed carefully daily, the more the better.

The character of the stalls and pens rests usually with the management. The exhibitor should be careful not to unduly expose a valuable animal to inclement weather. Frequently the stalls are open and valuable animals are subject to draughts and beating rains during heavy storms. Frequently blankets can be tacked up affording ample protection. There should be more individual exhibits of first-class pure-bred stocks from farms. Frequently of this sort takes the ribbons away from professional showmen. It is competition like this that adds interests to the live stocks department of an agricultural fair.

FARM NOTES.

Timothy hay is very deficient in albuminoids, while clover is rich in them. These go to make milk and growth in the young animal, and also contain the greatest amount of fertility to be returned to the soil. Therefore, it is of double value.

It is idle to say that there is no use in trying to get the last weed, for they will come again. It is objected that it is hopeless to try to keep weeds at bay when the seeds thereof are traversing the air and at certain seasons are coming down upon the land. A determined, persevering man is more than a match for weeds, though they come from any quarter whatever.

Has perfection been attained in the potato? Can it be found in any variety? Probably not. As a rule, we find that those varieties that are of the purest flavor are usually only moderate yielders, more subject to blight, more influenced by unique moisture and drouth. On the other hand, those of great productiveness, as a general thing, are poor or only passable in quality. There has been a vast improvement in the potato in the last few years, and new varieties are constantly replacing older ones.

LIVE STOCK NOTES.

After horses have been working hard and their hair is all matted down with sweat it rests them much to give them a good currying just before bed time.

After the primary swarm has emerged, after swarms may be prevented by cutting out all but one queen cell; but in every instance be sure to see that each colony from which the swarms has emerged has a good fertile queen in it.

There are hens in some sections that are far from the sources of supply of oyster shells, yet they equal those in other localities as egg producers. Nature prompts the fowl to select the food best adapted for their purpose, and, if given a variety, they will balance the supply so necessary for the production of eggs as well as provide for their bodily wants.

While some of the common pigeons are kept, they are not recommended; their flesh is too dark and they are too small to bring best prices. The American Homer takes the lead as an all around bird, with the white German and Belguim quite popular. The Dragoon, the Duchess and the Runt follow in the order named. The whites are very prolific, but smaller and more delicate. Some are crossing the two with good results. The Belgians are a very plump bird, but smaller than the American.

BATHING IN THE DEAD SEA.

Sir Gray Hill Tells of His Exciting Experience.

It is well known that the waters of the Dead Sea are much heavier than those of the ocean. This is due to the great amount of salt held in solution. A few years ago Mr., now Sir Gray Hill, of England made a trial of swimming in the sea and then in the Jordan, to compare the two. He tells the result in his book, "With the Beduins":

Many tourists while at Jericho bathe in the Dead Sea and the Jordan, and for very shame I could not pass by without doing so. But my experience was peculiar. I had with me one of the Jericho sheiks and one of the muleteers, and we rode first to the Dead Sea. Its waters are generally perfectly still and of a splendid blue color; but now, owing to the storm, they were very rough, the waves ran high, and for some two hundred yards from the shore were of an ugly brown.

I looked askance at it as I undressed, but felt bound to go in. The waves very promptly knocked me down, and filled my mouth, nose and eyes with their strong brine. Again I tried, and again, picking up one after another of the bare branches of trees which are carried down by the Jordan and washed on to the shore of this strange lake, with which I tried to steady myself as I walked in. But the force of the waves, aided by the great floating power of the water, twisted the branches out of my hands, and knocked me down time after time until, feeling that I had done enough for principle, I acknowledged that the victory did not lie on my side, and scrambled out, smarting most unpleasantly.

Then we galloped off to the Jordan, where I thought I should succeed better. So I cast about for a suitable place to jump in, for I did not like to crawl in ignominiously at the pilgrims' bathing-place, near which we were, and which would have been the wisest course to adopt. I wanted to take a header. So procuring a long stick, I ascended the stream a little, and made sure by sounding with it of a deep spot under an overhanging tree.

In I plunged, intending to swim down to the regular bathing-place, where I knew there must be a good bottom for getting out. Down I came with the fast-flowing, yellow flood, striking out in the fullest enjoyment.

But when I was just about to put my foot to the ground, I was brought up sharp with a tremenduous blow on my right breast. If it had struck me on the heart it would, I think, have killed me on the spot. I had come down on to the end of a stake pointing upstream, and driven in to mark the upper boundary of the bathing-place, but which was hidden, owing to the rains having raised the surface of the river. I had some difficulty in crawling out again, and was black and blue in the chest for a month afterward. There is nothing like a little experience to teach one wisdom.

WEARING 'EM OUT.

"You're not as strict with that youngster of yours as you used to be."

No, for economy's sake. Every month I used to have to buy myself a new pair of slippers and him a new pair of pants.

THE LAST LAP.

Meeker—"Just one year ago today I led my wife to the altar."

Bleeker—"You did, eh?"

Meeker—"Yes, and right there and then my leadership ended."