A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER XX.

"Now," I said, turning to Gedge, "perhaps you will show me over this new domain of mine. They seem to be pretty comfortable quarters, at any rate."

He looked at me strangely.

"You surely don't mean, sir, that you wish me to show you over your own house?" he said with incredulity.

"Of course I do," I answered. "I've never been over it yet, and I think I may as well embrace the opportunity now."

"But ha..n't you better go to your room and rest? It will surely do you good. I'll ring for Rayner, the valet." He spoke as though solicitous of my welfare.

"I want no valets, neither do I require rest," I answered impatiently.

"I mean to fathom this mystery."

"But pardon me," he said deferentially, "there is no mystery, as far as I can see. You accidentally struck your head against the statue while passing through the drawing-room, and were rendered unconscious. The blow has, according to the doctor, impaired your mental capacity a little. In a few days you'll be all right again. Poor Mrs. Heaton! —she's awfully upset."

"I will not have her called Mrs. Heaton!" I cried in indignation. "Understand that! I have no wife —and a hag like that I certainly would never marry."

He raised his eyebrows with a gesture of regret, sighed, but hazarded no remark.

"Come," I said, "show me over the place. It will be a most interesting visit, I'm sure." And I laughed, reflecting upon my extraordinary position, one absolutely unparalleled in man's history.

"But before doing so will you not sign one or two cheques?" he urged, glancing at his watch. "The postman will call for the letters in half an hour, and they must be despatched to-day."

"What cheques?"

"There are six," he answered, taking out a large cheque-book and opening it. "I've already made them out if you will kindly sign them."

I glanced at them. All six were for large amounts, each considerably over a thousand pounds.

"They relate to business transactions, all of which are exceedingly good bargains," he explained.

"Well," I said, laughing again, "I've never before signed cheques for such big amounts as these. But here goes, if you wish. Whether they'll be honored is quite another thing."

And I took up a pen and appended my signature to each, while he placed one by one in envelopes ready directed to receive them.

"Now," he said at last, "if you really wish me to take you round I'll do so, but the whole thing seems so droll and absurd that I hope, sir, you'll excuse my doubts as to your insanity."

"Well, why do you think I'm insane?" I asked, looking straight at him. "Do I look like a madman?"

"Not at all. With your head swathed in those bandages, you look like a man who's received a serious injury."

"Of course, that confounded old charlatan Britten put forward the suggestion that I'm not in my right mind!" I said. "But I tell you quite calmly, and without fear of contradiction—indeed, I could swear upon oath—that never in my life have I entered this place or set eyes upon you or upon that painted old girl before to-day. Now, if you were in my place, surely you would resent being called husband by a woman whom you don't know from Adam; you wouldn't relish being condemned as a lunatic by an idiotic old country quack, and being imposed upon all round by persons in whom you have not the slightest interest."

His face relaxed into a smile.

"If I may be permitted to advise you," he said, "I think it best not to discuss the matter further at present. A solution must present itself before long. Meanwhile your intellect will be rendered the clearer by response."

"I've already told you that I don't intend to rest until I've extricated myself from this absurdly false position," I said determinedly. "I feel absolutely certain that I've been mistaken for some one of the same name."

He shrugged his shoulders. He was evidently a shrewd fellow, this man who said he was my secretary and was apparently a very confidential servant.

"I'd like to know what to reply to Mawson's cable," he said. "You really ought to take some notice of such a marvellous stroke of good fortune. His discovery means fabulous wealth for you as holder of the concession."

"My dear sir," I said, "for mercy's sake don't bother me about this fellow and his confounded pans. Reply just as you like. You sem to know all about it. I don't—nor I don't want to know."

"But in a case like this I do not care to act on my own discretion alone," he protested. "They are evidently awaiting a reply in Dawson City."

"Let them wait," I said. "I don't want to bother my head over matters in which I can have no possible concern. This alleged matrimonial alliance of mine is of far more importance to me than all the gold in the Klondyke."

"Well, the lady is your wife, so why worry further about it?" he said.

"And how do you know, pray?"

"Because I was present at the ceremony."

I looked at him for a moment, unable to utter further words.

"I suppose you'll tell me next that you were my secretary in my bachelor days?" I said at last.

"Certainly I was."

"And you say that you were actually present at the church, and saw me married?" I cried, absolutely incredulous.

"I was. You were married at St. Andrew's, Wells Street. It was a smart wedding, too, for Mrs. Fordyce was very well known in society, and had a large circle of friends."

"Fordyce?" I echoed, puzzled.

"Yes, that was Mrs. Heaton's name before her marriage with you."

"Then she was a widow?" I gasped.

He nodded in the affirmative.

I groaned. The affair grew more puzzling now that he declared himself an actual witness of my matrimonial misfortune.

But how could such a thing have taken place without my knowledge? It was impossible. The mystery, like the strange incidents which had preceded this remarkable situation in which I found myself, grew more and more inexplicable each hour.

We went forth together, passing from room to room through the great country mansion. The place was handsome, of rather modern type, furnished glaringly in the manner which bespoke the parvenu. It possessed no mellow, time-worn appearance, as did the dear old Manor House beside the Severn. The furniture and hangings were too apparently of the Tottenham Court Road type, and the art displayed was that of the art-furnisher given carte blanche to furnish with the newest and most fashionable fancies in the matter of wall-papers, dados, cornices, and art-pottery. There were art-carpets and art-curtains, art-cupboards and art-chairs, art-china and art-chintzes. Art was everywhere in painful enamel and imposible greens. There were pictures, too, but different, indeed, to the long row of noble faces with their ruffles and doublets and their arms painted on shields in the corners that looked down so solemnly in the great hall at Heaton. The pictures in that modern mansion were of the queue-de-sicle French school, daubs by the miscalled impressionists, and some rather too chic to be decent.

That a large amount of money had been expended upon the place I could not doubt, but the effect was that of dazzling the gaze by color, and nowhere seemed there a good, comfortable, old-fashioned sitting-room. All the apartments were arranged to please the eye, and not for personal comfort. The house was just the kind that a man suddenly successful in the city might set up in the vain endeavor to develop into a country gentleman; for to become such is the ideal of every silk-hatted business man, whether he trades in stocks or stockings.

"That I should be compelled to show you over your own house is, to say the least, very amusing," said Gedge, as we were passing up the grand staircase. "If people were told of this they wouldn't believe it possible."

"I myself don't believe what you tell me is possible," I remarked. "But who gave orders for this furniture?"

"You did."

"And who chose it—approved of the designs, and all that sort of thing?"

"You certainly did," he answered. "Some of the ideas were, of course, Mrs. Heaton's."

"I thought so. I don't believe myself capable of such barbaric taste as those awful blues and greens in the little sitting-room."

"The morning-room, you mean."

"I suppose so. The whole place is like a furniture show-room—this style complete, thirty-five guineas and so on. You know the sort of thing I mean."

He smiled in amusement at my words.

"Your friends all admire the place," he remarked.

"What friends?"

"Sir Charles Stimmel, Mr. Larcombe, Lady Fraser, and people of that class."

"I never heard of them in all my life. Who are they?" I inquired, interested.

"Friends of yours. They visit here often enough. You surely ought to know them. Lady Fraser is your wife's dearest friend."

"Fraser?" I said reflectively. "The only Fraser I know is a baker in Clare Market, who supplies my old servant, Mrs. Parker, with bread." Then, after a pause, I added, "And you say that these people are friends of mine? Have I many friends?"

"Lots. A rich man has always plenty of good-humored acquaintances."

"They like to come down here for a breath of country air, I suppose, eh?" I laughed.

"That's about it," he answered. "A good many of them are not very sincere in their friendship, I fear. The man who has money, lives well, keeps a good table, and has choice wines in his cellar need never be at a loss for genial companions."

"You seem to be a bit of a philosopher, my friend," I remarked.

He smiled knowingly.

"I haven't' acted as your secretary without learning a few of the crooked ways of the world."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Don't I always act honestly, then?" This was something entirely new.

"Nobody can be honest in finance."

"Well," I said, resenting his imputation, "I wasn't aware that I had ever swindled a person of sixpence in my life."

"Sixpences in such sums as they deal in at Winchester House don't count. It's the thousands."

We passed a couple of gaping maid-servants in long-stringed caps, who stood aside, looking at me in wonder. No doubt the news that a demented man was in the house had reached the servants' hall. I was, in fact, on show to the domestics.

"Then you mean to imply that these financial dealings of mine — of which, by the way, I have no knowledge whatsoever—are not always quite straight?" I said, as we walked together down a long carpeted corridor.

He looked at me in hesitation.

"It's, of course, business," he answered—"sharp business. I don't mean to imply that the dealings at Winchester House are any more unfair than those of any other financier in the City; but sometimes, you know, there's just a flavor of smartness about them that might be misconstrued by a clever counsel in a Criminal court."

"What?" I cried, halting and glaring at him. "Now, be frank with me, Gedge. Tell me plainly, have I ever swindled anybody?"

"Certainly not," he said, laughing. "Why, it's this very smartness that has made you what you are to-day — a millionaire. If you had not been very wide awake and shrewd you'd have been ruined long ago."

"Then, I suppose, I'm well known in the city, eh?"

"Your name's as well known as Bennett's clock, and your credit stands as high as any one's between Ludgate Hill and Fenchurch Street."

"Extraordinary!" I said. "What you tell me sounds like some remarkable fairy tale."

"The balance at your banker's is sufficient proof that what I say is truth," he remarked. "There may be a good many fairy tales in certain prospectuses, but there certainly is none in your financial soundness."

(To be Continued.

GETS THE DOCTOR HABIT.

Woman Who Likes to Pour Out Story of Aches and Pains.

One of the tendencies of ill-health is to make one morbid. People who are constantly thinking about thir ailments, worrying about their troubles, suffering pain, often develop a morbid passion for sympathy. They want to tell everybody of their aches and pains, to describe their symptoms, says a writer. Have you ever known a woman who has acquired the doctor habit, a woman who loves nothing in the world quite so well as an opportunity to tell the doctor of her ailments? She has poured them out to unwelcome ears, to forced listeners, till she longs for some one who can really appreciate it all, who sympathizes with her in her troubles; so she sends for the doctor or goes to see him. This becomes almost a mania with some women, who have a few outside activities to divert them. Their minds naturally revert to themselves, and they think of their unfortunate condition until they become saturated with the poisoned thought.

TITTLE TATTLE.

Those people who do nothing do much harm.

Small mistakes may have big consequences.

Some men could only save money in prison.

Generally speaking, a woman is generally speaking.

Deserve the good opinions of those who think well of you.

It is not sufficient merely to aim straight—you must hit.

Conceit in a woman is bad enough, but in a man it is awful.

Enthusiasm can't do much without a certain amount of "hustle."

We can excuse meanness in ourselves, but how we despise it in others?

You may lead an ass to knowledge, but you cannot make him think.

Learning to be content with what we have is hard work for most of us.

Experience shows that if we want a thing cheaply we must pay pretty dearly for it.

"Laugh, and the world laughs with you"—so long as you are not laughing at the world.

KEEPING DOWN EXPENSES.

"Mary," he said, as he scowled at her over the breakfast table.

"John," she replied, fearlessly.

"Mary," he said, "what kind of a breakfast do you call this?"

"I call it an excellent one!" she replied, bravely.

"You do!" he exclaimed. "Well, I don't I think a little variety occasionally would be a good thing. Do you realize that this is the third morning this week that we have had cold bacon?"

"Certainly, John."

"And that we had cold boiled bacon for dinner yesterday, and cold boiled bacon for supper?"

"Of course, John. You wanted me to manage the house as economically as I could."

"Yes, but——"

"You said that the amount of meat consumed in this house would bankrupt a brewer."

"I know, but I——"

"And that I ought to plan with more regard for the expense."

"Certainly, certainly, Mary; but hang it all——"

"I've been following your instructions."

"But I don't like cold boiled bacon!"

"I know it, John," she said, in a businesslike way. 'That's what makes it last so long. It keeps expenses down splendidly, and if you want——"

"I don't!" he exclaimed, "I don't! Let them run up! You've got too good a business head for anything outside of a boarding-house."

The young man was leaning on the garden-gate chatting with the object of his affections when the latter said, hesitatingly:— "I am going to ask a great favor of you." "It is already granted;" he answered, devotedly. "A very great favor," she repeated, as if doubtful of the propriety of stating it. "You're sure that you won't think it presumptuous or forward of me?" "Never," he answered. "I glory in this evidence of your trust and confidence. Only tell me what I can do for you." "Well," she replied, with evident reluctance, "would you mind not leaning on that gate. Father painted it this afternoon, and he will be awfully provoked if he has to do it all over again."

SIZE OF BABYLON.

Much Wild Conjecture Swept Away by Recent Explorations.

The report of the German Oriental Society on the extensive explorations carried out on the ruins of ancient Babylon, which has just been issued under the editorship of Dr. Friedrich Delitzsch, is a document of more than usual interest, says the London Chronicle.

Perhaps one of the most astonishing discoveries in the field of topographical research has been the tracing of the walls of the city and the ascertainment of the true size of the great city. Wonderful descriptions of the size of Babylon have been given, based chiefly on the hearsay evidence of Herodotus, in ancient times, and the theories of the late Dr. Oppert. These writers made the city a vast parallelogram, surrounded by a wall fifty miles long and a hundred feet high, with one hundred gates, and bisected by the Euphrates. According to them the area was about as large as London and Paris together, or some forty square miles. All this wild conjecture has been swept away.

The exploration of the walls commenced at the Babil fort, and here was found a wall twenty-five feet thick, with buttresses every sixty feet. The line of the wall was traced to the southeast angle, until it bends to the west and joins the great quay on the banks of the river. This portion was pierced by only one gate, the gate of Isar, flanked by tall towers decorated with friezes of lions and dragons in encaustic tile work. On the north it was traced to the river bank. The whole enclosure covered an area of a little over one square mile, or roughly that of our City of London.

In the Ksar or "palace" mound were found the remains of two great palaces, one built by Natupalassar, the other by Nebuchadnezzar. Both were most complex in plan, containing hundreds of rooms for the accommodation of retainers, officials in the royal family. The two palaces are separated by a street. The later or new edifice is on the eastern side and consists of several groups of chambers arranged around quadrangles separated by strong walls and gateways. The largest of these is a royal quadrangle, entered by a double gateway.

On the south side of this square is the northern facade of the royal audience chamber or Selamlik. This facade was forty feet wide and had been richly decorated with floral designs in enamelled brick in yellow, white, blue and black. The audience hall measures 60 by 170 feet and on the south side is a deep alcove with a dias in front, where the royal throne was placed.

What a historic chamber this is! Here Nebuchadnezzar had sat and received homage on his conquest of Jerusalem. Perhaps in this very chamber Belshazzar's feast was held and the plaster covered walls had received the terrible message. Here Cyrus the Conqueror was enthroned in June 538 B. C., and perhaps in this very chamber Alexander of Macedon held the fatal revels after his overthrow of the Empire of the East.

Nebuchadnezzar speaks of richly decorated palaces and temples, but the one prevailing feature of all the buildings was the dull, monotonous brickwork, void of decoration. If gold and silver and precious stones, cedar and cypress wood, had been used, all disappeared long ago.

GOLD IN SOAKED ENVELOPE.

A London firm recently received from a gold miner in Alaska the following curious letter: "Gentlemen, —Enclosed you will find an envelope which you will tear up in small pieces and place in a glass of water; let soak for an hour or so, then stir and drain, and you will find thirty grains of gold for which you will send me a stylographic pen wrapped up in a late newspaper." These instructions were duly carried out, and the gold, value 6s., obtained, in exchange for which the ingenious miner was sent a stylographic pen and two newspapers.

A FOE TO MALARIA.

That most animals have some specific function to perform is well known. Now, scientists claim that a species of fish exists in Australian waters which feeds on the larvae of mosquitoes and so reduces the prospects of malaria. It belongs to a family of carnivorous or flesh-eating fish which is frequently found in the temperate and tropic zones, and usually in shallow water. Very small in size, being only about one and a half to two inches in length, it has, in the male, yellow and black striped fins, while the eye is of a bright blue. The fins during certain seasons of the year acquire great brilliancy.