A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER XXI.—(Cont'd).

I think I should have grown confidential towards Gedge were it not that he apparently treated me as one whose mind was wandering. He believed, and perhaps justly so, that my brain had been injured by the accidental blow. To him, of course, it seemed impossible that I, his master, should know nothing of my own affairs. The ludicrousness of the situation was to me entirely apparent, yet what could I do to avert it?

By careful questions I endeavored to obtain from him some facts regarding my past.

"You told me," I said, "that I have many friends. Among them are there any persons named Anson?"

"Anson?" he repeated reflectively. "No, I've never heard the name."

"Or Hickman?"

He shook his head.

"I lived once in Essex Street, Strand," I said. "Have I been to those chambers during the time—the five years you have been in my service?"

"Never, to my knowledge."

"Have I ever visited a house, The Boltons, in Kensington?"

"I think not," he responded.

"Curious! Very curious!" I observed, thinking deeply of the graceful, dark-eyed Mabel whom I had loved six years before, and who was now lost to me for ever.

"Among my friends is there a man named Doyle?" I inquired, after a pause.

"Doyle? Do you mean Mr. Richard Doyle the war correspondent?"

"Certainly," I cried excitedly. "Is he back?"

"He is one of your friends, and has often visited here," Gedge replied.

"What is his address? I'll wire to him at once."

"He's in Egypt. He left London last March, and has not yet returned."

I drew a long breath. Dick had evidently recovered from fever in India, and was still my best friend, although I had no knowledge of it.

What, I wondered, had been my actions in those six years of unconsciousness? Mine were indeed strange thoughts at that moment. Of all that had been told me I was unable to account for anything. I stood stunned, confounded, petrified.

For knowledge of what had transpired during those intervening years, or of my own career and actions during that period I had to rely upon the statements of others. My mind during all that time, it appeared, had been a perfect blank, incapable of receiving any impression whatsoever.

Nevertheless, when I came to consider how I had in so marvellous a manner established a reputation in the City, and had amassed the sum now lying at my bankers', I reflected that I could not have accomplished that without the exercise of considerable tact and mental capacity. I must, after all, have retained shrewd senses, but they had evidently been those of my other self—the self who had lived and moved as husband of that woman who called herself Mrs. Heaton.

"Tell me," I said, addressing Gedge again, "has my married life been a happy one?"

He looked at me inquiringly.

"Tell me the truth," I urged. "Don't conceal anything from me, for I intend to get at the bottom of this mystery."

"Well," he said, with considerable hesitation, "scarcely what one might call happy, I think."

"Ah, I understand," I said. "I know from your tone that you sympathize with me, Gedge."

He nodded without replying. Strange that I had never known this man until an hour ago, and yet I had grown so confidential with him. He seemed to be the only person who could present to me the plain truth.

Those six lost years were utterly puzzling. I was as one returned from the grave to find his world vanished, and all things changed.

I tried to reflect, to see some ray of light through the darkness of that lost period, but to me it seemed utterly inexistent. Those years, if I had really lived them, had melted away and left no trace behind. The events of my life prior to that eventful night when I had dined at The Boltons had no affinity to those of the present. I had ceased to be my old self, and by some inexplicable transition, mysterious and unheard of, I had, while retaining my name, become an entirely different man.

Six precious years of golden youth had vanished in a single night. All my ideals, all my love, all my hope, nay, my very personality, had been swept away and effaced for ever.

"Have I often visited Heaton — my own place?" I inquired, turning suddenly to Gedge.

"Not since your marriage, I believe," he answered. "You have always entertained some curious dislike towards the place. I went up there once to transact some business with your agent, and thought it a nice, charming old house."

"Aye, and so it is," I sighed, remembering the youthful days I had spent there long ago. All the year round was sunshine then, with the most ravishing snow-drifts in winter, and ice that sparkled in the sun so brilliantly that it seemed almost as jolly and frolicsome as the sunniest of sunlit streams, dancing and shimmering over the pebbles all through the cloudless summer. Did it ever rain in those old days long ago? Why, yes; and what splendid times I used to have on those occasions—toffee-making in the schoolroom, or watching old Dixon, the gamekeeper, cutting gunwads in the harness-room.

And I had entertained a marked dislike to the place! All my tastes and ideas during those blank years had apparently become inverted. I had lived and enjoyed a world exactly opposite to my own—the world of sordid money-making and the glaring display of riches. I had, in a word, aped the gentleman.

There was a small circular mirror in the library, and before it I stood, marking every line upon my face, the incredible impress of forgotten years.

"It is amazing, incredible!" I cried, heartsick with desire to penetrate the veil of mystery that enshrouded that long period of unconsciousness. "All that you have told me, Gedge, is absolutely beyond belief. There must be some mistake. It is impossible that six years can have passed without my knowledge."

"I think," he said, "that, after all, Britten's advice should be followed. You are evidently not yourself to-day, and rest will probably restore your mental power to its proper calibre."

"Bah!" I shouted angrily. "You still believe I'm mad. I tell you I'm not. I'll prove to you that I'm not."

"Well," he remarked quite calmly, "no sane man could be utterly ignorant of his own life. It doesn't stand to reason that he could."

"I tell you I'm quite as sane as you are," I cried. "Yet I've been utterly unconscious these six whole years."

"Nobody will believe you."

"But I swear it to be true," I protested. "Since the moment when consciousness left me in that house in Chelsea I have been as one dead."

He laughed increduously. The slightly confidential tone in which I had spoken had apparently induced him to treat me with indifference. This aroused my wrath. I was in no mood to argue whether or not I was responsible for my actions.

"A man surely can't be unconscious, while at the same time he transacts business and lives as gaily as you live," he laughed.

"Then you impute that all I've said is untrue, and is due merely to the fact that I'm a trifle demented, eh?"

"Britten has said that you are suffering from a fit of temporary derangement, and that you will recover after perfect rest."

"Then, by taking me around this house, showing me those books, and explaining all to me you've merely been humoring me as you would a harmless lunatic!" I cried furiously. "You don't believe what I say, that I'm perfectly in my right mind, therefore leave me. I have no further use for your presence, and prefer to be alone," I added harshly.

"Very well," he answered, rather piqued; "if you wish I'll, of course, go."

"Yes, go; and don't return till I send for you. Understand that! I'm in no humor to be fooled, or told that I'm a lunatic."

He shrugged his shoulders, and muttering some words I did not catch, turned and left the library.

CHAPTER XXII.

He is a faint-hearted creature indeed who, while struggling along some dark lane of life, cannot, at least intermittently, extract some comfort to himself from the thought that the turn must come at last—the turn which, presumably, will bring him out upon the well-metalled high-road of happy contentment.

I do not know that I was exactly faint-hearted. The mystery of all had so stunned me that I felt myself utterly incapable of believing anything. The whole thing seemed shadowy and unreal.

And yet the facts remained that I was still alive, standing there in that comfortable room, in possession of all my faculties, both mental and physical, an entirely different person to my old self, with six years of my past lost and unaccountable.

Beyond the lawn the shadow of the great trees looked cool and inviting, therefore I went forth, wandering heedlessly across the spacious park, my mind full of thoughts of that fateful night when I had fallen among that strange company and of Mabel, the woman I had loved so fondly and devotedly.

Sweet were the recollections that came back to me. How charming she had seemed to me as we had lingered hand-in-hand on our walks across the Park and Kensington Gardens, how soft and musical her voice, how full of tenderness her bright dark eyes! How idyllic was our love! She had surely read my undeclared passion. She had known the great secret in my heart.

Nevertheless, all had changed. In a woman's life half a dozen years is a long time, for she may develop from girl to matron in that space. The worst aspect of the affair presented itself to me. I had, in all probability, left her without uttering a word of farewell, and she—on her part—had, no doubt, accepted some other suitor. What more natural, indeed, than she should have married?

That thought held me rigid.

Again, as I strolled on beneath the rustling elms which led straight away in a wide old avenue towards where a distant village church stood, a prominent figure in the landscape, there recurred to me vivid recollections of that last night of my old self—of the astounding discovery I had made in the drawing-room at The Boltons.

How was I to account for that.

I paused and glanced around upon the view. All was quiet and peaceful there in the mid-day sunlight. Behind me stood the great white facade of Denbury; before a little to the right, lay a small village with its white cottages—the village of Littleham, I afterwards discovered—and to the left white cliffs and the blue stretch of the English Channel gleamed through the greenery.

From the avenue I turned and wandered down a by-path to a stile, and there I rested, in full uninterrupted view of the open sea. Deep below was a cove—Littleham Cove, it proved to be—and there, under shelter of the cliffs, a couple of yachts were riding gaily at anchor, while far away upon the clear horizon a dark smoke-trail showed the track of a steamer outward bound.

(To be Continued.)

BIRDS THAT DECEIVE.

"All birds are not so innocent as they would seem," says a naturalist. "Take, for instance, the goose. Most people have heard a goose hiss when threatened by danger. Well, that is a trick on the bird's part. In past ages, when the mother goose was sitting on her nest among the reeds, she somehow learned that this action made her head and neck simulate a snake. So it formed a fine defence. "The lapwing is another deceiver. If you approach her nest, she will set up a dismal outcry, and run backward and forward, trailing one wing on the ground, as though it were broken. Thinking to pick her up, you follow. Thus she lures you away from her young. In times of drought the thrush acts a lie. He will beat upon the ground with his claws like a dancer. By this he makes the earthworms think it is raining. Up they come, and then the wily thrush dines luxuriously."

ON THE FARM

LOOKS DO NOT ALWAYS COUNT

In a great many things, looks, or the appearance of a thing counts for a very great deal. The surrounding and outside appearance of a cheese factory or creamery count for much. An untidy and slovenly appearance gives a different impression from that produced by neatness and good taste. So in a great many things, looks count for much, and the cheese and butter maker should see to it that the factories present a neat and attractive appearance, both inside and out.

One of the things in which looks don't count is in the milk cans, cream cans, milk pails, etc. A milk pail rinsed out in water after milking may look clean, while it may be far from being in that condition. There may be minute particles of dirt left in the seams of that pail, where innumerable bacteria will propagate, and be ready to operate on the fresh milk at the next milking time. So with milk and cream cans. At many cheese factories the sour whey is returned to the patron in the milk cans. Upon the whey being emptied, the can may be merely washed out with cold or lukewarm water, and may present a clean appearance, so far as looks go. But it is far from clean, and cannot be considered as clean until it is thoroughly washed with boiling hot water, and placed in the sunlight to dry. So with the factory utensils. Butter makers often make the mistake of thinking the churn clean, because it looks that way. But if left without a thorough cleaning and scalding after each churning bad flavors may develop and cause injury to the butter.

The patron supplying milk to a cheese factory or cream to a creamery, and both the cheese and butter maker cannot, therefore, depend upon looks alone. They must make sure that everything is clean. Half way washing will not do. Thorough washing and scalding are necessary in every case. It is the unseen things, they call bacteria, cannot be harm. These little infinitesimal things, they call bacteria, canot be seen. If they could no one would have them lurking around in milk pails, milk cans, churns and vats to work their own sweet will. For this reason more than looks is required in cleaning all dairy untensils. A medium must be used that will reach these unseen things, and put them out of business, and that medium is plenty of scalding hot water. It will penetrate into all the cracks and crevices, and leave the utensils sweet and pure, as well as clean in appearance.

If everyone who handles milk in any way could be made to realize this, and to act upon it, what a revolution in the quality of our dairy products would be effected. Clean milk handled in clean utensils remains clean if properly kept, and assures cheese and butter of the highest quality being made. The dairyman must go deeper than mere looks. A box of butter may look good, and also a cheese, and looks count for a great deal, too, with these. But both may be far from being of prime quality. There must be something more than this, and that something can be attained by strict attention to cleanliness all along the line.

FEEDING FOR FEATHER GROWTH.

The growth of feather is not often taken into consideration in feeding young stock and moulting hens, although much can be done to assist old birds at a critical time by providing some food of an oily character. Among the best feather-forming foods are hemp-seed, linseed, and sunflower seeds. The last-named is not generally known to be so useful, but we can strongly recommend all gardening poultry-keepers to grow a crop of sun-flowers, the heads of which are generally ripe about moulting time, and the seeds can easily be beaten out.

A proper proportion of one-eighth part of hemp-seed, with other grains, given to young stock between the ages of four and a half and seven months, will greatly assist in growing the new feathers, and for old birds in the moult, a fourth part of hemp-seed will not be too much. Linseed meal may be given in the same proportion mixed with other meals, but it is not necessary to give this when hemp-seed is being provided.

CHEAP PRODUCTION OF PORK.

The man who has not provided a clover field for his sows and pigs to run in from now on through the summer, has no business raising hogs," says a farmer writing to The Indiana Farmer. The profit in hog production comes from making the greatest gains from the pasture and not when the hogs are put on grain feed. There should be no let-up in crowding the pigs. If the sows have been properly handled, they can stand heavy feeding while the pigs are sucking. Turn out the sows with their litters. See that they have a good water supply but let them live in clover now for a couple of months. If you have not clover for them, provide rape instead. It will be well to provide some rape for them at any rate as it will be very acceptable later on.

FORTUNES IN APPLE GROWING

Tasmania is Described as the Fruit-Growers' Paradise.

Thousands to-day are making fortunes in the cultivation of the apple in far-away Tasmania.

The island may well be described as the fruit-growers' paradise. An expert agriculturist with a ten-acre orchard can not only make a good income in a healthy occupation amid ideal surroundings, but find at the end of the season a very substantial balance at his bank.

It is in the Huon district, so named from the river of that name which flows through it, where the finest apple orchards are to be found. Curiously enough, it is very rare to find one man owning an orchard more than fifty or sixty acres in extent. The majority of them range from fifteen to thirty acres, while a ten-acre orchard is regarded as ample size, and five or six acres of good orchard land is considered quite enough to keep a family in comfort.

There are two orchards owned by two Scotsmen. They went out some few years ago, purchased the land at the modest sum of $2.50 per acre from the Government, cleared it, and planted apple trees upon it. Last year both of them netted over $7,500 apiece, entirely out of the sale of apples. Many a man, if he manages his ten acres of land properly, can make $2,500 or $3,000 profit at the end of the season. Some men are now making as much as $5,000 a year from their ten-acre patches.

The result is that some 10,000 people in the island are now growing apples, yet they cannot supply the demand. The sawmills in the colony could not turn out enough boxes last season to pack all the apples that were grown. The principal reason why the colonists are making nice little fortunes out of their apples is because the fruit has now captured the British markets. It required twenty-seven large steamers to carry the quantity taken by Great Britain last season. The value of the industry to the colony is not less than $1,250,000.

EMPRESS WAS HEROINE.

Dowager Empress of Russia Twice Saved Husband's Life.

The reported discovery of the Czarina of a "Terrorist death sentence" lying on the bed of her sleeping son recalls two similarly tragic episodes in the life of her mother-in-law, the Dowager Empress. On one occasion she found on her husband's dressing-table a curious and unfamiliar jewel case, and, on picking it up to examine it more closely, was both surprised and alarmed at its weight. Hurrying with it to her own room, she plunged it into a basin of water, and summoned the Prefect of Police, who pronounced the innocent-looking jewel case a bomb of a particularly deadly type. On another occasion, on entering Alexander's study, the Czarina fancied she heard a slight rustling sound behind the window curtains. With a rare presence of mind she took her husband away under pretext of bidding his children "good-night" in the nursery. On leaving the room she locked the door and gave the key to a party of soldiers, who on entering and examining the study, made the startling discovery that some one had made his escape through the window.

Dorothy, aged 5, who had been very ill, was much impressed with the wisdom of the family physician. "Why, mamma," she said one day, "if I wanted to die I couldn't, 'cause Dr. Blank wouldn't let me."

WAR LOSSES FROM DISEASE.

In a recent campaign of the French in Madagascar 14,000 men were sent to the front, of whom 29 were killed in action, and over 7,000 perished from preventable disease. In the Boer war the English losses were ten times greater from disease than from bullets.