A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER XXIII.

Reader, I must take you still further into my confidence. What you have already read is strange, but certain things which subsequently happened to me were even still stranger.

I held that astounding letter in my hand. My eyes were riveted upon it.

The words written there were puzzling indeed. A dozen times I read them through, agape with wonder.

The communication, upon the notepaper of the Bath Hotel at Bournemouth, was dated June 4th, 1891—five years before—and ran as follows:—

"Dear Mr. Heaton,

I very much regret that you should have thus misunderstood me. I thought when we met at Windermere you were quite of my opinion. You, however, appear to have grown tired after the five months of our engagement, and your love for me has suddenly cooled; therefore our paths in life must in future lie far apart. You have at least told me the truth honestly and straightforwardly. I, of course, believed that your declarations were true, and that you really loved me truly, but alas! it is evidently not so. I can only suffer in silence. Good-bye for ever. We shall never, never meet again. But I tell you, Wilford, that I bear you no malice, and that my prayers will ever be for your welfare and your happiness. Perhaps, sometimes you will give a passing thought to the sorrowful, heart-broken woman who still loves you.

"MABEL ANSON."

What could this mean? It spoke of our engagement for five months! I had no knowledge whatever of ever having declared the secret of my love, much less becoming her affianced husband. Was it possible that in the first few months of my unconscious life I had met her and told her of my affection, of how I worshipped her with all the strength of my being?

As I sat there with the carefully preserved letter in my hand there arose before me a vision of her calm ,fair face, bending over the piano, her handsome profile illumined by the candles on either side, the single diamond suspended by its invisible chain, gleaming at her throat like a giant's eye. The impression I had obtained of her on that night at The Boltons still remained indelibly with me. Yes, her beauty was superb, her sweetness unsurpassed by that of any other woman I had ever met.

Among the other private papers preserved within the wallet were four scraps of notepaper with typewriting upon them. All bore the same signature—that of the strange name "Avel." All of them made appointments. One asked me to meet the writer in the writing-room of the Hotel Victoria in London; another made an appointment to meet me "on the Promenade at Eastbourne opposite the Wish Tower;" a third suggested my office at Winchester House as a meeting-place, and the fourth gave a rendezvous on the departure platform at King's Cross Station.

I fell to wondering whether I had kept any of these engagements. The most recent of these letters was dated nearly two years ago.

But the afternoon was wearing on, therefore I placed the puzzling communications in my pocket and ascended to my room in order to rest, and thus carry out the feint of attending to old Britten's directions.

The dressing-bell awakened me, but, confident in the knowledge that I should remain undisturbed, I removed the bandages from my head, bathed the wound, and applied some plaster in the place of the handkerchief. Then, with my hat on, my injury was concealed.

The sun was declining when I managed to slip out of the house unobserved, and set forth down the avenue to Littleham village. The quaint old place was delightful in the evening calm, but, heedless of everything, I hurried forward down the hill to Withycombe Raleigh, and thence straight across the open country to Lympston station, where I took a third-class ticket for Exeter. At a wayside station a passenger for London is always remarked, therefore I only booked as far as the junction with the main line.

At Exeter I found that the up-mail was not due for ten minutes, therefore I telegraphed to London for a room at the Grand Hotel, and afterwards bought some newspapers with which to while away the journey.

Sight of newspapers dated six years later than those I had last seen aroused within me a lively curiosity. How incredible it all seemed as in that dimly lit railway-carriage I sat gathering from those printed pages the history of the lost six years of my life!

The only other occupant of the compartment besides myself was a woman. I had sought an empty carriage, but failing to find one, was compelled to accept her as travelling companion. She was youngish, perhaps thirty-five, and neatly dressed, but her face, as far as I could distinguish it through her spotted veil, was that of a woman melancholy and bowed down by trouble. In her dark hair were premature threads of silver, and her deep-sunken eyes, peering forth strangely at me, were the eyes of a woman rendered desperate.

I did not like the look of her. In travelling one is quick to entertain an instinctive dislike to one's companion, and it was so in my case. I found myself regretting that I had not entered a smoking-carriage. But I soon became absorbed in my papers and forgot her presence.

It was only her voice, a curiously high-pitched one, that made me start.

She inquired if I minded her closing the window because of the draught, and I at once closed it, responding rather frigidly, I believe.

But she was in no humor to allow the conversation to drop, and commenced to chat with a familiarity that surprised me.

She noticed how puzzled I became, and at length remarked with a laugh—

"You apparently don't recognize me, Mr. Heaton."

"No, madam," I answered, taken aback. "You have certainly the advantage of me."

This recognition was startling, for was I not flying to London to escape my friends? This woman, whoever she was, would without doubt recount her meeting with me.

"It is really very droll," she laughed. "I felt sure from the first, when you entered the compartment, that you didn't know me."

"I certainly don't know you," I responded coldly.

She smiled. "Ah! I expect it's my veil," she said. "But it's really remarkable that you should not recognize Joliot, your wife's maid."

"You! My wife's maid!" I gasped, recognizing in an instant how cleverly I had been run to earth.

"Yes," she replied. "Surely you recognize me?" and she raised her veil, displaying a rather unprepossessing face, dark and tragic, as though full of some hidden sorrow.

I had never seen the woman before in my life, but instantly I resolved to display no surprise and act with caution.

"Ah, of course!" I said lamely. "The light here is so bad, you know, that I didn't recognize you. And where are you going?"

"To London—to the dressmaker's."

"Mrs. Heaton has sent you on some commission, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"You joined this train at Exeter, then?"

"I came from Exmouth to Exeter, and changed," she explained. "I saw you get in at Lympston."

My heart sank within me. It was evident that this woman had been sent by my self-styled wife to keep watch upon my movements. If I intended to escape I should be compelled to make terms with her.

Those sharp dark eyes, with a curious light in them—eyes that seemed strangely staring and vacant at times—were fixed upon me, while the smile about her thin lips was clearly one of triumph, as though she had caught me in the act of flying from my home.

I reflected, but next moment resolved to take her into my confidence. I disliked her, for her manner was somewhat eccentric, and, furthermore, I had only her own word that she was really maid to that angular woman who called herself my wife. Nevertheless, I could do naught else than make a bargain with her.

'Now," I said at last, after some desultory conversation, "I want to make a suggestion to you. Do you think that if I gave you a ten-pound note you could forget having met me to-night? Do you think that you could forget having seen me at all?"

"Forget? I don't understand."

"Well, to put it plainly, I'm going to London, and I have no desire that anybody should know that I'm there," I explained. "When I am found to be missing from Denbury, Mrs. Heaton will do all in her power to discover me. You are the only person who knows that I've gone to London, and I want you to hold your tongue."

She smiled again, showing an even row of white teeth.

"I was sent by my mistress to travel by this train and to see where you went," she said bluntly.

"Exactly as I thought," I answered. "Now, you will accept this little present, and return to Denbury to-morrow after a fruitless errand—utterly fruitless, you understand?"

She took the ten sovereigns I handed her, and transferred them to her purse, promising to say nothing of having met me.

I gathered from her subsequent conversation that she had been maid to Mrs. Heaton ever since her marriage, and that she had acted as confidential servant. Many things she mentioned incidentally were of the greatest interest to me, yet they only served to show how utterly ignorant I was of all the past.

"But why did you disclose your identity?" I inquired, when the lights showed that we were entering the London suburbs.

"Because I felt certain that you didn't recognize me," she laughed; "and I had on wish to spy upon you, knowing as I do that your life is the reverse of happy."

"Then you pity me, eh?"

"I scarcely think that is the word that one of my position ought to use," she answered, with some hesitation. "Your life has, since your marriage, not been of the happiest, that's certain."

"And so you have no intention of telling any one where I've gone?" I asked eagerly.

"None in the least, sir. Rest assured that I shall say nothing — not a single word."

"I thank you," I said, and sat back pondering in silence until the train ran into Waterloo, where we parted, she again reassuring me of her intention to keep my secret.

I congratulated myself upon a very narrow escape, and, taking a cab, drove straight to Trafalgar Square. As I crossed Waterloo Bridge the long line of lights on the Embankment presented the same picture as they had ever done. Though six years had passed since I had last had knowledge of London, nothing had apparently changed. The red night-glare in the leaden sky was still the same; the same unceasing traffic; the same flashing of bright dresses and glittering jewels as hansoms passed and repassed in the Strand—just as I had known London by night during all my life.

The gold-braided porter at the Grand handed me out of the cab, and I ascended by the lift to the room allotted to me like a man in a dream. It hardly seemed possible that I could have been absent in mind from that whirling, fevered world of London for six whole years. I had given a false name in the reception bureau, fearing that those people who called themselves my friends — Heaven save the mark!—might make inquiries and cause my arrest as a wandering lunatic. I had no baggage, and I saw that the hotel-clerk looked upon me with some suspicion. Indeed, I threw down a couple of sovereigns, well knowing the rules that no person without luggage was taken unless he paid a deposit beforehand.

I laughed bitterly within myself. How strange it was!

Next morning I went forth and wandered down the Strand — the dear old Strand that I had once loved so well. No; it had in no wise changed, except, perhaps, that two or three monster buildings had sprung up, and that the theatres announced pieces quite unknown to me. A sudden desire seized me to see what kind of place was my own office. If, however, I went near there I might, I reflected, be recognized by some one who knew me. Therefore I turned into a barber's and had my beard cut off; then, further on, bought a new dust coat and another hat. In that disguise I took a hansom to Old Broad Street.

I was not long in finding the business headquarters of my other self. How curious it all was! My name was marked upon a huge brass plate in the entrance hall of that colossal block of offices, and I ascended to the first floor to find my name inscribed upon the door of one of the largest of the suites. I stood in the corridor carelessly reading a paper, and while doing so witnessed many persons, several of them smart-looking City men, leave, as though much business was being conducted within.

(To be Continued.)

ROMANCE OF A BROKEN ARM.

How General Bugly Scored Against the Insurance Company.

Here is the story of a case which is puzzling many lawyers. Some time ago an agent of the Beware Accident Insurance Company called on General Bugly and importuned him to have himself insured against accident.

"I don't need to be insured," said the general. "I am not exposed to danger."

"It may seem so," the persistent agent replied, "but, regardless of apparent security, accidents may befall us."

"There may be some truth in your view," said the general; and then, after a few moments' reflection he added, "For several years I have been tormented with a presentment that my left arm is to be broken."

"Very likely to happen," exclaimed the agent.

"Still," the general continued, "time passes, and the accident seems as far off now as ever."

"My dear sir," said the agent, "misfortune is ever distant until it falls upon us."

"That's a fact," the general assented. "Now, I'll make you a proposition; if you'll agre to insure my left arm I'll take out a policy."

"It is not usual, general, to insure one certain legt or arm, but I am inclined to accommodate you."

"All right. Now this is my plan: Insure my left arm, and if it be broken pay me fifty dollars per week until it gets well; and until it is broken I will pay you five dollars a week."

The agent said he would write to the secretary of the company. He did so, telling the secretary, after explaining the proposition, that the general was one of the most peculiar men he had ever seen. The secretary, much amused, submitted the matter to the board. The board, as much amused as the secretary, accepted the proposition.

Regularly every week, during two months, the company received five dollars from the general, and then came the information that the general's left arm was broken. The local physician, employed by the company, and who was, by the way, a friend of the general's, sent in his statement to the effect that the arm was broken, and the general received instructions to draw on the company for fifty dollars each week, until his arm should be pronounced well.

Six months passed and still the general continued to draw. The secretary wrote to the physician and received the reply that the arm had not begun to mend. Six more months passed, during which time the general, patiently, even cheerfully, drew his money. The board held a special meeting, and instructed the secretary to go to the general's home and investigate the matter. The official, upon arriving, sought the company's physician.

"Is it possible," said he, "that the general's arm has not recovered?"

"It is a fact."

"Did you bandage it properly?"

"Yes; come and see for yourself."

The physician, conducting the secretary to the general's house, remarked, as they entered:—

"The general is not at home, but his arm is here. There it is, on the table. Nicely bandaged, you see. Don't understand why it does not grow together? Perhaps it is made of the wrong sort of wood."

The secretary immediately brought

The secretary immediately brought an action. Able lawyers have been employed, and the result is anxiously awaited.

TOO NEAR.

He—"The closer a man gets to nature the happier he is."

She—"That's not what you said when you slipped on a piece of banana peel yesterday."

"Thought you said you had ploughed that ten-acre field?" said the first farmer. "No; I only said I was thinking about ploughing it," said the second farmer. "Oh, I see; you've merely turned it over in your mind."

ON THE FARM

COOLING THE CREAM.

At once on finishing the separating, begin the cooling of the cream. The calves can wait a few minutes better than can the cream. There are devices made for cooling the cream as fast as it comes from the separator. These are good and can be made of much service if kept clean, but they add to the number of utensils that have to be washed and, like the strainer, they may be dispensed with. The dairyman should provide himself with enough cans to hold the cream. A can of this kind holds from three to five gallons, is about 20 inches deep and nine inches in diameter. These cans are the best to keep the cream in at the farm. They are convenient to use and keep clean, and they present a large cooling surface, which is a great advantage in cooling cream. Set the pail or pails of cream in a tank of cold water and stir, testing the temperature with a thermometer until the cream is as cold as the water. This is imperative if success is to be obtained. As with the wiping of the cows' udders, this is a matter of a few extra minutes, but it will be a factor in deciding success or failure. The stirring rod and the thermometer should be considered as indispensable as the crank on the separator, and yet hardly one in five hundred farmers has a thermometer that can be used for this purpose. If the can of cream is set in a tank of water and left without stirring, it will be hours before it becomes thoroughly cool. In the meantime the germs which have gotten into it in spite of the greatest care, have been multiplying at a tremendous rate and the cream goes to the station spoiled. At the temperature of ordinary well water the development of the germs is very slow, and for this reason no time should be lost in cooling the cream to his temperature. The thermometer is absolutely the only means by which one can tell whether the cream is fully cooled or not. By stirring and testing with the thermometer the task of cooling will be found to be short, and one will finish with the satisfaction of knowing that the cream is cool. It ought to be cooled down to 60 degrees F. If the water is cold enough to carry the cream lower so much the better.

HINTS TO BEGINNERS.

One can scarcely pick up a poultry periodical that does not have some advice to people starting with poultry. Some may be good, some bad, and some indifferent. If many of the parties that write this would follow it themselves they would be better off.

To begin with any kind of business one must have an object in view. The two objects that are foremost in most people's minds are money returns and success generally. Success is only obtained by a combination of honesty, energy, printer's ink and a first-class quality of goods to back up your claims. In order to succeed you must have some ideas of your own, for no one can succeed in anything on other people's plans and ideas. One begins in the poultry business just as he would in any other kind of business—with capital and some ability. Both are needed. One may have plenty of money to carry on a business and yet have no ability necessary to succeed. Others have the ability but are minus the money. The poultry business offers a better chance to a person with ability minus the money than the man with money alone, for there are very few people who can get a start in the poultry business. A very small outlay will give one a good start if they only have the patience to wait and grow up with the business. Some of the largest and most successful poultry breeders of to-day built up from a very small start as a side line.

Poultry is the greatest industry in the world that appeals to and is handled by everyone. It is not subject to trust methods. It will pay a large interest and does not necessitate a fortune to start with. All one needs is energy, ability, thoroughbred poultry and a small patch of land. Start with an object, either eggs and fancy stock, meat and fancy or commercial poultry. The advantage of keeping thoroughbred stock is that you have two chances. They will lay more eggs even if sold for market eggs and you can advertise, sell breeding stock and eggs for hatching, and thus increase your profits. Begin to think for yourself when you begin to raise poultry. If you make a mistake find a way to avoid it and success is yours.