A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER XXIV.

A man-servant answered my summons.

"Mrs. Anson?" I inquired.

"Mrs. Anson 's out of town, sir," answered the man. "The house is let."

"Furnished?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is your mistress at home?" I inquired.

"I don't know sir," answered the man, 'iplomat'cally.

"Oh, of course!" I exclaimed, taking out a card. It was the first I found within my cigarette-case, and was intentionally not my own. "Will you take this to your mistress, and ask her if she will kindly spare me a few moments. I am a friend of Mrs. Anson's."

"I'll see if she's at home, sir," said the man, dubiously; and then, asking me into the entrance-hall, he left me standing while he went in search of his mistress.

That hall was the same down which I had groped my way when blind. I saw the closed door of the drawing-room, and knew that within that room the young man whose name I knew not had been foully done to death. There was the very umbrella-stand from which I had taken the walking-stick, and the door of the little-used library, which I had examined on that night when I had dined there at Mrs. Anson's invitation—the last night of my existence as my real self.

The man returned in a few moments and invited me into a room on the left—the morning-room I supposed it to be saying:

"My mistress is at home, sir, and will see you."

I had not remained there more than a couple of minutes before a youngish woman of perhaps thirty or so entered, with a rather distant bow. She was severely dressed in black; dark-haired, and not very prepossessing. Her lips were too thick to be beautiful, and her top row of teeth seemed too much in evidence. Her face was not exactly ugly, but she was by no means good-looking.

"I have to apologize," I said, rising and bowing. "I understand that Mrs. Anson has left her house, and I thought you would kindly give me her address. I wish to see her on a most pressing personal matter."

She regarded me with some suspicion, I thought.

"If you are a friend of Mrs. Anson's, would it not be better if you wrote to her and addressed the letter here? Her letters are always forwarded," she answered.

She was evidently a rather shrewd and superior person.

"Well, to tell the truth," I said, "I have reasons for not writing."

"Then I much regret, sir, that I am unable to furnish you with her address," she responded, somewhat stiffly.

"I have been absent from London for six years," I exclaimed. "It is because of that long absence that I prefer not to write."

"I fear that I cannot assist you," she replied briefly.

There was a strange, determined look in her dark-grey eyes. She did not seem a person amenable to argument.

'But it is regarding an urgent and purely private affair that I wish to see Mrs. Anson," I said.

"I have nothing whatever to do with the private affairs of Mrs. Anson," she replied. "I merely rent this house from her, and, in justice to her, it is not likely that I give the address to every chance caller."

"I am no chance caller," I responded. "During her residence here six years ago I was a welcome guest at her table."

"Six years ago is a long time. You may, for aught I know, not be so welcome now."

Did she, I wondered, speak the truth?

"You certainly speak very plainly, madam," I answered, rising stiffly. "If I have put you to any inconvenience I regret it. I can, no doubt, obtain from some other person the information I require."

"Most probably you can, sir," she answered, in a manner quite unruffled. "I tell you that if you write I shall at once forward your letter to her. More than that I cannot do."

"I presume you are acquainted with Miss Mabel Anson?" I inquired.

She smiled with some sarcasm.

"The Anson family do not concern me in the least, sir," she replied, also rising as sign that my unfruitful interview was at an end. Mention of Mabel seemed to have irritated her, and although I plied her with further questions, she would tell me absolutely nothing.

When I bowed and took my leave I fear that I did not show her very much politeness.

In my eagerness for information her hesitation to give me Mrs. Anson's address never struck me as perfectly natural. She, of course, did not know me, and her offer to forward a letter was all that she could do in such circumstances. Yet at the time I did not view it in that light, but regarded the tenant of that house of mystery as an ill-mannered and extremely disagreeable person.

In despair I returned to St. James's Street and entered my club, the Devonshire. Several men whom I did not know greeted me warmly in the smoking-room, and, from their manner, I saw that in my lost years I had evidently not abandoned that institution. They chatted to me about politics and stocks, two subjects upon which I was perfectly ignorant, and I was compelled to exercise considerable tact and ingenuity in order to avoid betraying the astounding blank in my mind.

After a restless hour I drove back westward and called at old Channing's in Cornwall Gardens in an endeavor to learn Mabel's address. The colonel was out, but I saw Mrs. Channing, and she could, alas! tell me nothing beyond the fact that Mrs. Anson and her daughter had been abroad for three years past—where, she knew not. They had drifted apart, she said, and never now exchanged letters.

"Is Mabel married?" I inquired as carelessly as I could, although in breathless eagerness.

"I really don't know," she responded. "I have heard some talk of the likelihood of her marrying, but whether she has done so I am unaware."

"And the man whom rumor designated as her husband? Who was he?" I inquired quickly.

"A young nobleman, I believe."

"You don't know his name?"

"No. It was mentioned at the time, but it has slipped my memory. One takes no particular notice of tea-cup gossip."

"Well, Mrs. Channing," I said, confidently, "I am extremely desirous of discovering the whereabouts of Mabel Anson. I want to see her upon a rather curious matter which closely concerns herself. Can you tell me of any one who is intimate with them?"

"Unfortunately, I know of no one," she answered. "The truth is, that they left London quite suddenly; and, indeed, it was a matter for surprise that they neither paid farewell visits nor told any of their friends where they were going."

"Curious," I remarked—"very curious!"

Then there was, I reflected, apparently some reason for the present tenant at The Boltons refusing the address.

"Yes," Mrs. Channing went on, "it was all very mysterious. Nobody knows the real truth why they went abroad so suddenly and secretly. It was between three and four years ago now, and nothing, to my knowledge, has since been heard of them."

"Very mysterious," I responded. "It would seem almost as though they had some reason for concealing their whereabouts."

"That's just what lots of people have said. You may depend upon it that there is something very mysterious in it all. We were such very close friends for years, and it is certainly strange that Mrs. Anson has never confided in me the secret of her whereabouts."

"I remembered the old Colonel's strange warning on that evening long ago, when I had first met Mabel at his table. What, I wondered, could he know of them to their detriment?

I remained for a quarter of an hour longer. The colonel's wife was full of the latest tittle-tattle, as the wife of an ex-attache always is. It is part of the diplomatic training to be always well-informed of the sayings and doings of our neighbors; and as I allowed her to gossip on she revealed to me many things of which I was in ignorance. Nellie, her daughter, had, it appeared, married the son of a Newcastle shipowner a couple of years before, and now lived near Berwick-on-Tweed.

Suddenly a thought occurred to me, and I asked whether she knew Miss Wells or the man Hickman, who had been my fellow-guests on that night when I had dined at The Boltons.

"I knew a Miss Wells—a very pronounced old maid, who was a friend of hers," answered Mrs. Channing. "But she caught influenza about a year ago, and died of it. She lived in Edith Villas, Kensington."

"And Hickman, a fair man, of middle age, with a very ugly face?"

She reflected.

"I have no recollection of ever having met him, or of hearing of him," she answered. "Was he an intimate friend?"

"I believe so," I said. Then, finding that she could explain nothing more, I took my leave.

Next day and the next I wandered about London aimlessly and without hope. Mabel and her mother had, for some unaccountable reason, gone abroad and carefully concealed their whereabouts. Had this fact any connection with the mysterious tragedy that had been enacted at The Boltons? That one thought was ever uppermost in my mind.

A week passed, and I still remained at the Grand, going forth each day, wandering hither and thither, but never entering the Club or going to places where I thought it likely that I might be recognized. I could not return to the life at Denbury with that angular woman at the head of my table—the woman who called herself my wife. If I returned I felt that the mystery of it all must drive me to despair, and I should, in a fit of desperation, commit suicide.

I ask any of those who read this strange history of my life, whether they consider themselves capable of remaining calm and tranquil in such circumstances, or of carefully going over all the events in their sequence and considering them with logical reasoning. I tried to do so, but in vain. For hours I sat within the hotel smoking and thinking. I was living an entirely false life, existing in the fear of recognition by unknown friends, and the constant dread that sooner or later I must return to that hated life in Devonshire.

That a hue-and-cry had been raised regarding my disappearance was plain from a paragraph which I read in one of the morning papers about ten days after my departure from Denbury. In the paragraph I was designated as "a financier well-known in the City," and it was there stated that I had left my home suddenly "after betraying signs of insanity," and had not since been heard of.

Insanity! I laughed bitterly as I read those lines supplied by the Exeter correspondent of the Central News. The police had, no doubt, received my description, and were actively on the watch to trace me and restore me to my "friends."

For nearly a fortnight I had been in hiding, and was now on the verge of desperation. By means of one of the cheques I had taken from Denbury I succeeded in drawing a good round sum without my bankers being aware of my address, and was contemplating going abroad in order to avoid the possibility of being put under restraint as a lunatic, when one evening, in the dusky sunset, I went forth and wandered down Northumberland Avenue to the Victoria Embankment. In comparison with the life and bustle of the Strand and Trafalgar Square, the wide roadway beside the Thames is always quiet and reposeful. Upon that same pavement over which I now strolled in the direction of the Temple I had, in the days of my blindness, taken my lessons in walking alone. That pavement had been my practice-ground on summer evenings under the tender guidance of poor old Parker, the faithful servant now lost to me. My eyesight had now grown as strong as that of other men. The great blank in my mind was all that distinguished me from my fellows. During those past fourteen days I had been probing a period which I had not lived, and ascertaining by slow degrees the events of my unknown past.

And as I strolled along beneath the plane trees over that broad pavement I recollected that the last occasion I had been there was on that memorable evening when I had lost myself, and was subsequently present at the midnight tragedy in that house of mystery. I gazed around. In the ornamental gardens, bright with geraniums, some tired Londoners were taking their ease upon the seats provided by that most paternal of all metropolitan institutions, the London County Council; children were shouting as they played at ball and hop-scotch, that narrow strip of green being, alas! all they knew of Nature's beauty outside their world of bricks and mortar. The slight wind stirred the dusty foliage of the trees beneath which I walked, while to the left river-steamers belched forth volumes of black smoke, and barges slowly floated down with the tide. On either side were great buildings, and straight before the dome of St. Paul's. Over all was that golden, uncertain haze which in central London is called sunset, the light which so quickly turns to cold, grey, without any of those glories of crimson and gold which those in the country associate with the summer sun's decline.

That walk induced within me melancholy thoughts of a wasted life. I loved Mabel Anson—I loved her with all my soul. Now that marriage with her was no longer within the range of possibility I was inert and despairing, utterly heedless of everything. I had, if truth be told, no further desire for life. All joy within me was now blotted out.

(To be Continued.)

ON THE FARM

FATTENING FOWLS.

In Sussex, the staple fattening food is oats, ground very fine by a special process, mixed with skim milk. But there are other less costly mixtures which have given excellent results, and there is no reason why the fowl-fattener should depend solely on one kind of food. Success depends largely upon the proportions in which the various feeding stuffs are mixed. A mixture of ground oats, two parts, maize meal, one part; middlings, one part, makes an excellent fattening ration. The principal moistening agent in all mixtures must be skim milk, since nothing else that may be used for this purpose is quite as good. Some fatteners, however, feed a good deal of broth, which is made by boiling down all kinds of rough fat, tallow, bones, pieces of meat, livers, etc., which can be picked up at small cost. The method is to boil these various kinds of offal in a large vat for several hours, and according as the broth or soup is required it is drawn off and mixed with meal.

Fowls in coops may be fed either twice or thrice a day; but we prefer to feed them only twice, as we have found that they keep healthier and maintain a hearty appetite for a longer time upon two meals a day than on three, while there is no apparent difference in gains of weight. Much labor is also saved by feeding only twice a day, and this is an important consideration in establishments where some hundreds of fowls are being fattened at once. The hours of feeding should be regular and evenly divided—that is to say, there should not be too long a period between any two meals, for fowls in close confinement, with no opportunity of foraging for a single morsel of food, suffer in health and decrease in weight, when kept fasting too long. The attendant should be early astir, so as to give the fowls their morning meal between 5 and 6 o'clock in summer time, and as early as there is daylinght in winter, and the evening meal is also to be regulated by the length of the day. In winter it must be fed between 3 and 4 o'clock, but in the time of longer daylinght the usual mealtime is about 5 p.m.

At feeding times the attendant should be particularly observant, for there is no other time at which the health of the birds can be so accurately gauged. It will be observed that certain fowls will eat ravenously from the start, and will improve in condition daily, whilst others seem to lose their relish for food within a few days after having been placed in the coops. The latter birds are usually unsuitable subjects for fattening being anaemic and thriftless, and the only course that can be taken with them is to let them loose, and if they can be got into good health and fair condition in the fields, to sell them off without fattening, for anything they will fetch. We may mention that the fowls which have necessarily to be handled in this way are exceptional, and that the majority of healthy fowls respond readily to the efforts of the fattener. It is unnecessary and indeed impossible to lay down and keep rules as to the quantity of food to be fed, and in this the attendant must be guided entirely by observation. The practice is to place as much food in the troughs as it is supposed the fowls will eat up greedily, and then to observe them in order to ascertain if all are feeding well. If the attendant sees that more food is required, he gives it; but, if, on the other hand, there is food left over, the troughs are scraped into the feeding pail, and as the food cannot possibly get soiled in the troughs, it may be fed again at the next meal. The attendant should, however, aim at mixing only as much food at a time as will be consumed at a single meal.—Homestead Poultry Expert.

FENCE-POST PRESERVATIVE.

Experiments have for some years been conducted at United States stations to determine the best method of wood preservation. The growing scarcity of timber gives this question an interest for all of us. If the life of a fence post could be doubled, what a saving would be effected? Many substances have been tried, but the preservative now recommended is creosote. This is a by-product of coal tar, which is produced at most plants for the manufacture of illuminating gas. This tar is distilled, and during the process the condensed vapors are run into three separate vessels and thus separated into the light oil of tar or napthas, the dead oil of coal tar or creosote, and pitch. Wood tar, when distilled in a similar manner, gives "wood creosote." which also possesses strong antiseptic properties. The treatment recommended for fence posts is to have an iron tank capable of holding fifty posts, filled, when the posts are in, to a depth of three and a half feet with creosote and kept hot. The posts are kept in this bath for from one to five hours, depending on the character of the wood, and are then transferred to a cold bath of the same material for an hour.

It is claimed that by this process low-grade woods, such as willow, cottonwood and elm, can be made as lasting as cedar or oak untreated.

JEWISH FAMILY WIPED OUT.

Russian Revolutionists Took Terrible Vengeance.

News has reached St. Petersburg of a terrible vengeance taken by the Revolutionists of Yurivka, in Yekaterinoslav Province, upon a Jewish family named Edelstein, who were accused of giving information to the authorities regarding the activities of the agitators. They visited the Edelstein house at night and threw bombs through the windows. They then opened on the members of the family with revolvers and shot to death the father, a daughter, a woman guest and her child. The mother, a son, son-in-law and two grandsons were severely wounded.

After this murderous onslaught the Revolutionists temporarily retired, and help for the wounded was summoned. In the course of a couple of hours the victims who were still alive had been conveyed to a hospital. Not satisfied with their vengeance, the Revolutionists, now a well-armed band of about forty or sixty men, descended upon the hospital, overpowered the nurses and guards and shot the mother and son to death, after which they made their escape.

Another despatch from the provinces received here says that the prisoners in the jail at Saratov, upon discovering that two of their comrades were traitors, fell upon them and beat them to death.

FINDING A HORSESHOE.

There is a man who has a very poor idea of the horseshoe as a bringer of good luck.

"I found one in the road some time ago," he remarked. "As a matter of fact, another old gentleman found it also about the same time. We both wanted it, and there was a tussle for it.

"I got the shoe, a black eye, a torn finger from a rusty nail in the shoe, and a summons for assault and battery.

"It wasn't a very good start, but I thought I'd give it a fair trial. Of course, in nailing the shoe up above the front door I managed to smash my thumb and fall from the step-ladder.

"Then I sat down and waited for the luck to begin. That shoe seemed to be endowed with the power to attract trouble in every form.

"Duns, bailiffs, the landlord, measles, and poverty were rarely out of the house, and my faith was shaken.

"Then one day, when the tax-collector was standing on the top step, that shoe came down with a crash——"

"Ah!" interrupted a sympathizer "Luck at last!"

"Not a bit of it," sighed the unlucky one. "It missed him by a foot."