A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER XXIX.

At five o'clock that same afternoon I alighted from a hansom before the Langham Hotel, and presenting my card at the bureau, inquired for Miss Anson. The clerk looked at me rather curiously, I thought, glanced at the card, and entering the telephone-box, spoke some words into the instrument.

I was shown into a small room on the first floor, where I waited until a gentlemanly, middle-aged, fair-headed man entered, with my card in his hand.

"Good afternoon," he said, greeting me rather stiffly. "Her Highness is at present out driving. Is there anything I can do? I am her secretary."

"Her Highness?" I echoed, with a smile. "There must be some mistake. I have called to see Miss Mabel Anson."

He regarded me with some surprise.

"Are you, then, unaware that Anson is the name adopted by Her Highness to preserve her incognita?" he asked, glancing at me in quick suspicion. "Are you not aware of her real rank and station?"

"No!" I cried, in blank amazement. "This is indeed a revelation to me! I have known Miss Anson intimately during the past six years. What is her true rank?"

"The lady whom you know as Miss Anson is Her Imperial Highness the Archduchess Marie Elizabeth Mabel, third daughter of His Majesty the Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria."

"Mabel! The daughter of an Emperor!" I gasped involuntarily. "Impossible!"

He shrugged his shoulders. He was a foreigner, although he spoke English well—an Austrian most probably.

"You are surprised," he laughed. "Many people have also been surprised, as the Archduchess living in England nearly her whole life, has frequently been taken for an Englishwoman."

"I can't believe it!" I cried. "Surely there must be some mistake!"

I remembered those days of long ago when we had wandered together in Kensington Gardens. How charming and ingenuous she was; how sweet and unaffected by worldly vanities, how trustful was that look when she gazed into my eyes! Her air was never that of the daughter of the reigning House of Hapsbourg-Lorraine. She had possessed all the enchantment of ideal grace without the dignity of rank, and it seemed incredible that she was actually a princess whose home was the most brilliant Court of Europe.

"I can quite understand your surprise," observed the secretary "But what is the nature of your business with Her Highness?"

"It is of a purely private nature."

He glanced at the card.

"The Archduchess does not receive callers," he answered coldly.

"But at least you will give her my name, and tell her that I have something of urgent importance to communicate to her," I cried eagerly.

He hesitated. "If you are, as you allege, an old friend, I will place your card before her," he said at last, with some hesitation. "You may leave your address, and if Her Highness consents to receive you I will communicate with you."

"No," I answered in desperation; "I will remain and await her return."

"That is impossible," he responded "She has many engagements, and certainly cannot receive you to-day."

I recollected that the letter I had found at Denbury made it plain that we had parted abruptly. If this man gave her my card without any word, it was more than likely that she would refuse to see me.

Therefore I entered into argument with him, but while I was speaking the door opened suddenly, and my love stood before me.

She halted there, elegantly dressed, having just returned from her drive, and for a moment we faced each other speechless.

"Mr. Heaton!" she cried, and then, in breathless hurry arising from the sudden and joyful surprise, she rushed forward.

Our hands grasped. For the moment I could utter no word. The secretary, noticing our mutual embarrassment, discreetly withdrew, closing the door after him.

Once again I found myself, after those six lost years, alone with my love.

"At last!" I cried. "At last I have found you, after all these months!" I was earnestly gazing into her great dark eyes. She had altered but little since that night long ago at The Boltons, when I had discovered the traces of that hideous tragedy.

"And why have you come back to me now?" she inquired in a low, strained voice.

"I have striven long and diligently to find you," I answered frankly, "because—because I wished to tell you how I love you—that I have loved you always—from the first moment that we met."

A grave expression crossed her countenance.

"And yet you forsook me! You calmly broke off the secret engagement that we had mutually made, and left me without a single word. You have married," she added resentfully, "therefore it is scarcely fitting that you should come here with a false declaration upon your lips."

"It is no false declaration, I swear," I cried. "As for my wife, I knew her not, and she is now dead."

"Dead!" she gasped. "You knew her not! I don't understand."

"I have loved you always — always, Princess—for I have only ten minutes ago ascertained your true rank——"

"Mabel to you—as always," she said, softly interrupting me.

"Ah, thank you for those words!" I cried, taking her small gloved hand. "I have loved you from the first moment that we met at the Colonel's, long ago—you remember that night?"

"I shall never forget it," she faltered in that low tone as of old, which was as sweetest music to my ears.

"And you remember that evening when I dined with you at The Boltons?" I said. "Incomprehensible though it may seem, I began a new life from that night, and for six whole years have existed in a state of utter unconsciousness of all the past. Will you consider me insane if I tell you that I have no knowledge whatever of meeting you after that night, and only knew of our engagement by discovering this letter among my private papers a couple of months ago?" and I drew her letter from my pocket.

"Your words sound most remarkable," she said, deeply interested. "Relate the whole of the facts to me. But first come along to my sitting-room. We may be interrupted here."

And she led the way to the end of the corridor, where we entered an elegant little salon, one of the handsome suite of rooms she occupied.

She drew forth a chair for me, and allowing a middle-aged gentlewoman—her lady-in-waiting, I presume—to take her hat and gloves, we once more found ourselves alone.

How exquisitely beautiful she was! Yet her royal birth, alas! placed her beyond my reach. All my hopes and aspirations had been in an instant crushed by the knowledge of her rank. I could only now relate to her the truth, and seek her forgiveness for what had seemed a cruel injustice.

I took her unresisting hand, and told her how long ago I had loved her, not daring to expose to her the great secret of my heart. If we had mutually decided upon marriage, and I had deliberately deserted her, it was, I declared, because of that remarkable unconsciousness which had blotted out all knowledge of my life previous to that last night when we had dined together, and I had accompanied the man Hickman to his lodgings.

"But tell me all," she urged, "so that I can understand and judge accordingly."

And then, beginning at the beginning, I recounted the whole of the amazing facts, just as I have narrated them to the reader in these foregoing chapters.

I think the telling occupied most part of an hour; but she sat there, her lovely eyes fixed upon me, her mouth half open, held dumb and motionless by the strange story I unfolded. Once or twice she gave vent to ejaculations of surprise, and I saw that only by dint of supreme effort did she succeed in preserving her self-control. I told her everything. I did not seek to conceal one single fact.

"And he was actually murdered in my house?" she cried, starting up at last. "You were present?"

I explained to her in detail the events of that fateful night.

"Then at last the truth is plain!" she exclaimed. "You have supplied the key to the enigma for which I have been so long in search!"

"Tell me," I said, in breathless earnestness. "All these years I have been striving in vain to solve the problem."

She paused, her dark, fathomless eyes fixed upon me, as though lacking courage to tell me the truth.

"I deceived you, Wilford, from the first," she faltered. "I hid from you the secret of my birth, and it was at my request Colonel Channing—who, of course, knew me well when he was British Attache at Vienna—refused to tell you the truth. You wonder, of course, that I should live in England incognita. Probably, however, you know that my mother, the late Empress, loved England and the English. She gave me an English name at my baptism, and when only five years of age I was sent here to be educated. At seventeen I returned to Vienna, but soon became tired of the eternal glitter of palace life, and a year or two later, as soon as I was of age and my own mistress, I returned to London, took into my service Mrs. Anson, the widow of an English officer well known to my mother, and in order to preserve my incognita caused her to pass as my mother. I took the house at The Boltons, and only Colonel and Mrs. Channing knew my real station. I was passionately fond of music, and desired to complete my studies, besides which I am intensely fond of London and of life unfettered by the trammels which must hamper the daughter of an Emperor."

"You preferred a quiet, free life in London to that at your father's Court?"

"Exactly," she answered. "At twenty-one I had had my fill of life at Court, and found existence in London, where I was unknown, far more pleasant. Besides Mrs. Anson, I had a companion a young Englishwoman who had been governess in a well-known family in Vienna. Her name was Grainger."

"Grainger?" I cried. "Edna Grainger?"

"The same. She was my companion. Well, after I had been established at The Boltons nearly a year I met, while on a visit to a country house, a young man with whom I became on very friendly terms—Prince Alexander, heir to the throne of Bulgaria. We met often, and altthough I still passed as Mabel Anson, our acquaintanceship ripened into a mutual affection. With a disregard for the convenances, I induced Mrs. Anson to invite him on several occasions to The Boltons. One morning, however, I received a private message from Count de Walkenstein-Trosburg, our ambassador here, saying that he had received a cipher telegraphic despatch that my father, the Emperor, was very unwell, and his Excellency suggested that I should return to Vienna. This I did, accompanied by Mrs. Anson, and leaving the woman Grainger in charge of the household as usual. I wrote to the young Prince from Vienna, but received no reply, and when I returned a fortnight later searched for him in vain. He had mysteriously disappeared. A few days before, in my dreams, I had seen the fatal raven, the evil omen of my House and feared the worst.'

"Then the man who was murdered at The Boltons on that night was none other than Prince Alexander, the heir to the throne of Bulgaria!" I cried.

"Without a doubt," she answered. "What you have just told me makes it all plain. You took from the dead man's pocket a small gold pencil-case, and you will remember that I recognized it as one that I had given him. It was that fact which caused me to suspect you."

"Suspect me? Did you believe me guilty of murder?"

"I did not then know that murder had been committed. All that was known was that the heir to the throne had mysteriously disappeared. The terrible truth I have just learnt from your lips. The discovery that the little gift I had made to him was in your possession filled me with suspicion, and in order to solve the mystery I invoked the aid of the police-agent attached to our Embassy, and invited both of you to dine, in order that he might meet you. You will remember the man you met on that night?"

"Hickman!" I cried. "Was he really a police-agent?"

"Yes. He induced you, it appears, to go to a lodging he had taken for the purpose, and without my knowledge gave you a drugged cigar. You fell unconscious, and this enabled him to thoroughly overhaul your pockets, and also to go to your chambers during the night, enter with your latch-key, and make a complete search, the result of which convinced us both that you had no hand in the missing man's disappearance, in spite of the fact that his dress-stud and pencil-case were in your possession. On the following morning, however, when you were but half conscious—Hickman having then returned from making his search at Essex Street—you accidentally struck your head a violent blow on the corner of the stone mantel-shelf. This blow, so severe that they were compelled to remove you to the hospital, apparently affected your brain, for when I met you again a month later you seemed curiously vacant in mind, and had no recollection whatever of the events that had passed."

"I had none, I assure you," I said.

"It seemed marvellous that you should be utterly in ignorance of what followed," she went on, her sweet eyes still gazing deeply into mine. "You told me how you loved me, and I, loving you in return, we entered upon a clandestine engagement that was to be secret from all. A few summer months went by, happy, joyous months, the most blissful in all my life, and then your love suddenly cooled. You had embarked in financial schemes in the City—you were becoming enriched by some concessions in Bulgaria, it was whispered—but your love for me slowly died, and you married a woman twice your age. Can you imagine my feelings? I was heart-broken, Wilford—utterly heart-broken."

"But I knew not what I was doing!" I hastened to declare. "I loved you always—always. My brain had been injured by that blow, and all my tastes and feelings thereby became inverted."

"I remained in England a few weeks longer, wandered aimlessly hither and thither, and then at last returned to Vienna and plunged into the vortex of gaiety at Court, in order to forget my sorrow."

"And that woman Grainger? What of her?"

"She left my service about a month after that night when you met with your accident at The Boltons. I have not seen her since."

I then related how for the past month I had been closely watching her, and repeated the conversation I had overheard at Hull between her and her visitors on the previous night.

"The woman, after leaving my service, has, it seems, somehow become an agent of the Bulgarian Government. She knows the truth," she said decisively. "We must obtain it from her."

"It was a woman who struck the young Prince down!" I exclaimed quickly. "Of that I am certain.

My love reflected for a brief instant.

"Perhaps," she said. "The woman was jealous of the attention he paid me."

(To be Continued.)

PERPETUAL.

Bowser met Jenks the other day, and asked him what he was doing for a living.

"Selling a deodorizing powder."

"Last time I saw you you were selling an insect powder to be sprinkled on the floor."

"I know; now I am going round to the same houses selling this disinfectant to get the smell of the insect powder out of the house. Next week I'll sell a mixture to drive away the smell of the disinfectant."

HER LAST CHANCE.

Bride-Elect—"Mamma insists on our having a stylish church wedding."

Groom-Elect—"I wonder why?"

Bride-Elect—"She says it will probably be the last time I'll ever have a chance to show off in good clothes."

QUITE PROPERLY BACKWARD.

"He's quite a classical scholar, isn't he?"

"Well, he's backward in reading Hebrew."

"You don't say? I thought he was particularly good at that."

"So he is but that's the way you have to read Hebrew."

PROOF.

Sniggins (angrily)—"Do you know that your chickens come over to my yard?"

Snooks—"I supposed that they did, for they never come back again."

ON THE FARM

WEANING FOALS.

Foals, as a rule, had better be weaned at five to six months old. They should be used to being kept in a box stall with the dam part of each day for some time before weaning, and, while the mare is tied, some chopped oats and bran kept in a box or manger for the foal to nibble at. If the mare is needed for work, she may be returned to the foal twice or three times a day, and then less frequently each day, thus drying her gradually, or, as some prefer, the foal may be weaned by taking it away from its dam at once, for good and all, provided it has previously learned to eat and drink, in which case the mare should be kept far enough away to prevent her hearing the foal call, and milked twice a day at first, and later once a day, to avoid trouble from mammitis, till she is sufficiently dry to be safe. If there are two foals on the farm to be weaned, it is better to keep them together for company, as one is likely to worry from loneliness. After the fly season is over, it is good practice to allow the foal the run of a yard or paddock daily for exercise, and it should be fed regularly a fairly liberal ration of a mixture of chopped oats and bran, and, if available, a carrot or two, in addition to what good sweet clover hay it will clean up between meals. This treatment should be continued through the winter, the amount of grain and other feed being gradually increased as the foal grows older. Attention should be given to his hoofs, which will be liable to grow long and unshapely unless trimmed and rasped occasionally to keep them in good shape.

REGULARITY IN FEEDING.

A horse that is fed regularly will be in better condition on three measures of oats in the day than one that is fed irregularly will be on four. He knows exactly when his attendant will feed him, and does not weary for his meals; whereas a horse that is fed at any or all times is never really satisfied, and will worry while waiting for his careless attendant and his meals. Irregularity in feeding is also a productive cause of many stable vices. No more straw or hay should be placed before a horse in the morning than he will eat up cleanly in an hour, a less quantity should be given at midday, and in the evening she should never get any more than will reasonably serve him over night. Regularity in feeding is important in any class of live stock in insuring the best results.

FARM NOTES.

In filling walls with sawdust, whether for silos, icehouses or root-bins, the sawdust should be dry and well packed down, or it will shrink and settle and leave empty spaces.

There is such a thing as being too economical about the expenditure of money for farm tools. True, tools of all kinds cost. And yet, the man who expects to keep up with the procession in these days of sharp competition must be prepared with the latest improved farm implements to do his work promptly and in season.

Rye can be sowed for a cover crop as late as October, but the earlier it is sown the better growth it will make and the more perfectly it will cover the ground. When plowed under, rye adds nothing to the soil but organic matter made from plant food already in the soil. On the other hand, crimson clover, being a legume, takes nitrogen from the air and stores it up in the soil. For this reason it makes a far better cover crop than rye.

There is no labor more universal among cultivators than the attempted destruction of weeds and there is none which is commonly gone about with more irregularity and want of system. Weeds infest nearly all cultivated grounds, and their destruction is generally attempted after they have grown a foot high, more or less, either by laborious hand labor, or more rapidly but more imperfectly with the work of horses. In the garden, it is mostly performed, if at all, by the hand; in the large cornfield the ploy and cultivator turn over or tear up the large weeds and leave many untouched. The true management should be the commencement of this labor with the planting or sowing of the crop.

There are more than 5,000 motor-boats already on the canals of Holland.

The growth of the beard is strongest in most men on the right-hand side.