The Woman In the Alcove

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN,

Author of "The Millionaire Baby," "The Filigree Ball," "The House In the Mist," "The Amethyst Box," Etc.

COPYRIGHT, 1906, THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY.

In "The Woman In the Alcove" Anna Katharine Green has woven a plot of unusual intricacy and interest. The mystery is most cleverly unraveled through the agency of no professional detective, but by a young woman whose heart is enlisted in the cause of one of the suspects. She is made to tell her story with all the well known skill of the author, which has won for her the highest place among American writers of stories of mystery.

CHAPTER I.

I WAS perhaps the plainest girl in the room that night. I was also the happiest—up to 1 o'clock. Then my whole world trembled, or at least suffered an eclipse. Why and how I am about to state.

I was not made for love. This I had often said to myself, very often of late. A figure I am too diminutive, in face far too unbeautiful for me to cherish expectations of this nature. Indeed love had never entered into my plan of life, as was evinced by the nurse's diploma I had just gained after three years of hard study and severe training.

I was not made for love. But if I had been, had I been gifted with height, regularity of feature or even with that eloquence of expression which redeems all defects save those which savor of deformity, I knew well whose eye I would have chosen to please, whose heart I should have felt proud to win.

This knowledge came with a rush to my heart—did I say heart? I should have said understanding, which is something very different—when at the end of the first dance I looked up from the midst of the bevy of girls by whom I was surrounded and saw Anson Durand's fine figure emerging from that quarter of the hall where our host and hostess stood to receive their guests. His eye was roaming hither and thither, and his manner was both eager and expectant. Whom was he seeking? Some one of the many bright and vivacious girls about me, for he turned almost instantly our way. But which one?

I thought I knew. I remembered at those house I had met him first, at those house I had seen him many times since. She was a lovely girl, witty and vivacious, and she stood at his very moment at my elbow. In her beauty lay the lure, the natural lure for a man of his gifts and striking personality. If I continued to watch I would soon see his countenance light up under the recognition she could not fail to give him. And I was right. In another instant it did, and with a brightness there was no mistaking. But the feeling common to the human heart finds such warmth, such expressiveness to the features. How handsome it made him look, how distinguished, how everything I was not except—

But what does this mean? He has passed Miss Sperry—passed her with a smile and a friendly word—and is speaking to me, singling me out, offering me his arm. He is smiling, too, as he smiled on Miss Sperry, but more warmly, with more that is personal in it. I took his arm in a daze. The lights were dimmer than I thought. Nothing was really bright except his smile. It seemed to change the world for me. I forgot that I was plain, forgot that I was small, with nothing to recommend me to the eye or heart, and let myself be drawn away, asking nothing, anticipating nothing, till I found myself alone with him in the recessed recesses of the conservatory, with only the throb of music in our ears to link us to the scene we had left.

Why had he brought me here into this fairyland of opalescent lights and suffocating perfumes? What could he have to say—to show? Ah, in another moment I knew! He had seized my hands, and love, ardent love, came pouring from his lips.

Could it be real? Was I the object of all this feeling, I? If so, then life had changed for me indeed.

Silent from rush of emotion I searched his face to see if this paradise, whose gates I was thus passionately bidden to enter, was indeed a verity or only a dream born of the excitement of the dance and the charm of a scene exceptional in its splendor and picturesqueness even for so luxurious a city as New York.

But it was no mere dream. Truth and earnestness were in his manner, and his words were neither feverish nor forced.

"I love you! I need you!" So I heard, and so he soon made me believe. You have charmed me from the first. Your tantalizing, trusting, loyal self, is no other, sweeter than any other, has drawn the heart from my breast. I have seen many women, admired many women, but you only have I loved. Will you be my wife?"

I was dazzled, moved beyond anything I could have conceived. I forgot all that I had hitherto said to myself, all that I had endeavored to impress upon my heart when I beheld him approaching, intent, as I believed, in his search for another woman, and, confiding in his honesty, trusting entirely to his faith, I allowed the plans and purposes of years to vanish in the glamour of this new joy and spoke the word which linked us together in a bond which half an hour before I had never dreamed would unite me to any man.

His impassioned "mine, mine!" filled my cup to overflowing. Something of the ecstasy of living entered my soul, which in spite of all I have suffered since recreated the world for me and made all that went before but the prelude to the new life, the new joy.

Oh, I was happy, happy—perhaps too happy! As the conservatory filled and we passed back into the adjoining room the glimpse I caught of myself in one of the mirrors startled me into thinking so, for had it not been for the odd color of my dress and the unique way in which I wore my hair that night I should not have recognized the beaming girl who faced me so naively from the depths of the responsive glass.

Can one be too happy? I do not know. I know that one can be too perplexed, too burdened and too sad.

Thus far I have spoken only of myself in connection with the evening's elaborate function; but, though entitled by my old Dutch blood to a certain social consideration which I am happy to say never failed me, I even in this hour of supreme satisfaction attracted very little attention and awoke small comment. There was another woman present better calculated to do this—a fair woman, large and of a bountiful presence, accustomed to conquest and gifted with the power of carrying off her victories with a certain lazy grace irresistibly fascinating to the ordinary man; a gorgeously appareled woman, with a diamond on her breast too vivid for most women, almost too vivid for her. I noticed this diamond early in the evening, and then I noticed her. She was not as fine as the diamond, but she was very fine, and had I been in a less ecstatic frame of mind I might have envied the homage she received from all the men, not excepting him upon whose arm I leaned. Later there was no one in the world I envied less.

The ball was a private and very elegant one. There were some notable guests. One gentleman in particular was pointed out to me as an Englishman of great distinction and political importance. I thought him a very interesting man for his years, but odd and a trifle self centered. Though greatly courted, he seemed strangely restless under the fire of eyes to which he was constantly subjected and only happy when free to use his own in contemplation of the scene about him. Had I been less absorbed in my own happiness I might have noted sooner than I did that this contemplation was confined to such groups as gathered about the lady with the diamond. But this I failed to observe at the time, and consequently was much surprised to come upon him at the end of one of the dances talking with this lady in an animated and courtly manner totally opposed to the apathy, amounting to boredom, with which he had hitherto met all advances.

Yet it was not admiration for her person which he openly displayed. During the whole time he stood there his eyes seldom rose to her face. They lingered mainly—and this was what aroused my curiosity—on the great fan of ostrich plumes which this opulent beauty held against her breast. Was he desirous of seeing the great diamond she thus unconsciously (or was it consciously) shielded from his gaze? It was possible, for, as I continued to note him, he suddenly bent toward her and as quickly raised himself again with a look which was quite inexplicable to me. The lady had shifted her fan a moment, and his eyes had fallen on the gem.

The next thing I recall with any definiteness was a tete-a-tete conversation which I held with my lover on a certain yellow divan at the end of one of the halls

To the right of this divan rose a curtained recess, highly suggestive of romance, called "the alcove." As this alcove figures prominently in my story, I will pause here to describe it.

It was originally intended to contain a large group of statuary which our host, Mr. Ramsdell, had ordered from Italy to adorn his new house. He is a man of original ideas in regard to such matters and in this instance had gone so far as to have this end of the house constructed with a special view to an advantageous display of this promised work of art. Fearing the ponderous effect of a pedestal large enough to hold such a considerable group, he had planned to raise it to the level of the eye by having the alcove floor built a few feet higher than the main one. A flight of low, wide steps connected the two, which, following the curve of the wall, added much to the beauty of this portion of the hall.

The group was a failure and was never shipped. But the alcove remained, and, possessing as it did all the advantages of a room in the way of heat and light, had been turned into a miniature retreat of exceptional beauty.

The seclusion it offered extended, or so we were happy to think, to the solitary divan at its base on which Mr. Durand and I were seated. With possibly an undue confidence in the advantage of our position, we were discussing a subject interesting only to ourselves when Mr. Durand interrupted himself to declare: "You are the woman I want, you and you only. And I want you soon. When do you think you can marry me? Within a week—if—if"—

Did my look stop him? I was startled. I had heard no incoherent phrase from him before.

"A week!" I remonstrated. "We take more time than that to fit ourselves for a journey or some transient pleasure. I hardly realize my engagement yet."

"You have not been thinking of it for these last two months as I have."

"No," I replied demurely, forgetting everything else in my delight at this admission.

"Nor are you a nomad among clubs and restaurants."

"No, I have a home."

"Nor do you love me as deeply as I do you."

This I thought open to argument.

"The home you speak of is a luxurious one," he continued. "I cannot offer you its equal. Do you expect me to?"

I was indignant.

"You know that I do not. Shall I, who deliberately chose a nurse's life when an indulgent uncle's heart and home were open to me, shrink from braving poverty with the man I love? We will begin as simply as you please"—

"No," he peremptorily put in, yet with a certain hesitancy which seemed to speak of doubts he hardly acknowledged to himself, "I will not marry you if I must expose you to privation or to the genteel poverty I hate. I love you more than you realize and wish to make your life a happy one. I cannot give you all you have been accustomed to in your rich uncle's house, but if matters prosper with me, if the chance I have built on succeeds—and it will fail or succeed tonight—you will have those comforts which love will heighten into luxuries and—and"—

He was becoming incoherent and this time with his eyes fixed elsewhere than on my face. Following his gaze, I discovered what had distracted his attention. The lady with the diamond was approaching us on her way to the alcove. She was accompanied by two gentlemen, both strangers to me, and her head, sparkling with brilliants, was turning from one to the other with an indolent grace. I was not surprised that the man at my side quivered and made a start as if to rise. She was a gorgeous image. In comparison with her imposing figure in its trailing robe of rich pink velvet my diminutive frame in its sea green gown must have looked as faded and colorless as a half obliterated pastel.

"A striking woman," I remarked as I saw he was not likely to resume the conversation which her presence had interrupted. "And what a diamond!"

The glance he cast me was peculiar.

"Did you notice it particularly?" he asked.

Astonished, for there was something very uneasy in his manner so that I half expected to see him rise and join the group he was so eagerly watching without waiting for my lips to frame a response, I quickly replied:

"It would be difficult not to notice what one would naturally expect to see only on the breast of a queen. But perhaps she is a queen. I should judge so from the homage which follows her."

His eyes sought mine. There was inquiry in them, but it was an inquiry I did not understand.

"What can you know about diamonds?" he presently demanded. "Nothing but their glitter, and glitter is not all. The gem she wears may be a very tawdry one."

I flushed with humiliation. He was a dealer in gems—that was his business—and the check which he had put upon my enthusiasm certainly made me conscious of my own presumption. Yet I was not disposed to take back my words. I had had a better opportunity than himself for seeing this remarkable jewel, and, with the perversity of a somewhat ruffled mood, I burst forth as soon as the color had subsided from my cheeks:

"No, no! It is glorious, magnificent. I never saw its like. I doubt if you ever have, for all your daily acquaintance with jewels. Its value must be enormous. Who is she? You seem to know her."

It was a direct question, but I received no reply. Mr. Durand's eyes had followed the lady, who had lingered somewhat ostentatiously on the top step, and they did not return to me till she had vanished with her companions behind the long plush curtains which partly veiled the entrance. By this time he had forgotten my words, if he had ever heard them, and it was with the forced animation of one whose thoughts are elsewhere that he finally returned to the old plea:

When would I marry him? If he could offer me a home in a month—and he would know by tomorrow if he could do so—would I come to him then? He would not say in a week. That was perhaps too soon. But in a month? Would I not promise to be his in a month?

What I answered I scarcely recall. His eyes had stolen back to the alcove, and mine had followed them. The gentlemen who had accompanied the lady inside were coming out again, but others were advancing to take their places, and soon she was engaged in holding a regular court in this favored retreat.

Why should this interest me? Why should I notice her or look that way at all? Because Mr. Durand did? Possibly. I remember that for all his ardent lovemaking I felt a little piqued that he should divide his attentions in this way. Perhaps I thought that for this evening at least he might have been blind to a mere coquette's fascinations.

I was thus doubly engaged in listening to my lover's words and in watching the various gentlemen who went up and down the steps when a former partner advanced and reminded me that I had promised him a waltz. Loath to leave Mr. Durand, yet seeing no way of excusing myself to Mr. Fox, I cast an appealing glance at the former and was greatly chagrined to find him already on his feet.

"Enjoy your dance," he cried. "I have a word to say to Mrs. Fairbrother," and was gone before my new partner had taken me on his arm.

Was Mrs. Fairbrother the lady with the diamond? Yes. As I turned to enter the parlor with my partner I caught a glimpse of Mr. Durand's tall figure just disappearing from the step behind the sage green curtains.

"Who is Mrs. Fairbrother?" I inquired of Mr. Fox at the end of the dance.

Mr. Fox, who is one of society's perennial beaux, knows everybody.

"She is—well, she was Abner Fairbrother's wife. You know Fairbrother, the millionaire who built that curious structure on Eighty-sixth street. At present they are living apart—an amicable understanding, I believe. Her diamond makes her conspicuous. It is one of the most remarkable stones in New York, perhaps in the United States. Have you observed it?"

"Yes—that is, at a distance. Do you think her very handsome?"

"Mrs. Fairbrother? She's called so, but she's not my style." Here he gave me a killing glance. "I admire women of mind and heart. They do not need to wear jewels worth an ordinary man's fortune."

I looked about for an excuse to leave this none too desirable partner.

"Let us go back into the long hall," I urged. "The ceaseless whirl of these dancers is making me dizzy."

With the ease of a gallant man he took me on his arm, and soon we were promenading again in the direction of the alcove. A passing glimpse of its interior was afforded me as we turned to retrace our steps in front of the yellow divan. The lady with the diamond was still there. A fold of the superb pink velvet she wore protruded across the gap made by the half drawn curtains, just as it had done a half hour before. But it was impossible to see her face or who was with her. What I could see, however, and did was the figure of a man leaning against the wall at the foot of the steps. At first I thought this person unknown to me; then I perceived that he was no other than the chief guest of the evening, the Englishman of whom I have previously spoken.

His expression had altered. He looked now both anxious and absorbed—particularly anxious and particularly

He plunged down the steps with a cry.

absorbed—so much so that I was not surprised that no one ventured to approach him. Again I wondered and again I asked myself for whom or for what he was waiting. For Mr. Durand to leave this lady's presence? No, no; I would not believe that. Mr. Durand could not be there still, yet some women make it difficult for a man to leave them, and, realizing this, I could not forbear casting a parting glance behind me as, yielding to Mr. Fox's importunities, I turned toward the supper room. It showed me the Englishman in the act of lifting two cups of coffee from a small table standing near the reception room door. As his manner plainly betokened whither he was bound with this refreshment, I felt all my uneasiness vanish and was able to take my seat at one of the small tables with which the supper room was filled and for a few minutes at least lend an ear to Mr. Fox's vapid compliment and trite opinions. Then my attention wandered.

I had not moved nor had I shifted my gaze from the scene before me—the ordinary scene of a gay and well filled supper room—yet I found myself looking, as if through a mist I had not even seen develop, at something as strange, unusual and remote as any phantasm, yet distinct enough in its outlines for me to get a decided impression of a square of light surrounding the figure of a man in a peculiar pose not easily imagined and not easily described. It all passed in an instant, and I sat staring at the window opposite me with the feeling of one who has just seen a vision. Yet almost immediately I forgot the whole occurrence in my anxiety as to Mr. Durand's whereabouts. Certainly he was amusing himself very much elsewhere or he would have found an opportunity of joining me long before this. He was not even in sight, and I grew weary of the endless menu and the senseless chitchat of my companion and, finding him amenable to my whims, rose from my seat at table and made my way to a group of acquaintances standing just outside the supper room door. As I listened to their greetings some impulse led me to cast another glance down the hall toward the alcove. A man—a waiter—was issuing from it in a rush. Bad news was in his face, and as his eyes encountered those of Mr. Ramsdell, who was advancing hurriedly to meet him, he plunged down the steps with a cry which drew a crowd about the two in an instant.

What was it? What had happened? Mad with an anxiety I did not stop to define, I rushed toward this group now swaying from side to side in irrepressible excitement, when suddenly everything swam before me, and I fell in a swoon to the floor.

Some one had shouted aloud:

"Mrs. Fairbrother has been murdered and her diamond stolen! Lock the doors!"

CHAPTER II.

I MUST have remained insensible for many minutes, for when I returned to full consciousness the supper room was empty and the 200 guests I had left seated at table were gathered in agitated groups about the hall. This was what I first noted. Not till afterward did I realize my own situation. I was lying on a couch in a remote corner of this same hall, and beside me, but not looking at me, stood my lover, Mr. Durand.

How he came to know my state and find me in the general disturbance I did not stop to inquire. It was enough for me at that moment to look up and see him so near. Indeed, the relief was so great, the sense of his protection so comforting, that I involuntarily stretched out my hand in gratitude toward him, but, failing to attract his attention, slipped to the floor and took my stand at his side. This roused him, and he gave me a look which steadied me in spite of the thrill of surprise with which I recognized his extreme pallor and a certain peculiar hesitation in his manner not at all natural to it.

Meanwhile some words uttered near us were slowly making their way into my benumbed brain. The waiter who had raised the first alarm was endeavoring to describe to an importunate group in advance of us what he had come upon in that murderous alcove.

"I was carrying about a tray of ices," he was saying, "and, seeing the lady sitting there, went up. I had expected to find the place full of gentlemen, but she was all alone and did not move as I picked my way over her long train. The next moment I had dropped ices, tray and all. I had come face to face with her and seen that she was dead. She had been stabbed and robbed. There was no diamond on her breast, but there was blood."

A hubbub of disordered sentences seasoned with horrified cries followed this simple description. Then a general movement took place in the direction of the alcove, during which Mr. Durand stooped to my ear and whispered:

"We must get out of this. You are not strong enough to stand such excitement. Don't you think we can escape by the window over there?"

"What, without wraps and in such a snowstorm?" I protested. "Besides, uncle will be looking for me. He came with me, you know."

An expression of annoyance—or was it perplexity?—crossed Mr. Durand's face, and he made a movement as if to leave me.

"I must go," he began, but stopped at my glance of surprise and assumed a different air, one which became him very much better. "Pardon me, dear, I will take you to your uncle. This—this dreadful tragedy, interrupting so gay a scene, has quite upset me. I was always sensitive to the sight, the smell, even to the very mention of the word blood."

So was I, but not to the point of cowardice. But then I had not just come from an interview with the murdered woman. Her glances, her smiles, the lift of her eyebrows were not fresh memories to me. Some consideration was certainly due him for the shock he must be laboring under. Yet I did not know how to keep back the vital question:

"Who did it? You must have heard some one say."

"I have heard nothing," was his somewhat fierce rejoinder. Then as I made a move: "What! You do not wish to follow the crowd there?"

"I wish to find my uncle, and he is in that crowd."

Mr. Durand said nothing further, and together we passed down the hall. A strange mood pervaded my mind. Instead of wishing to fly a scene which under ordinary conditions would have filled me with utter repugnance, I felt a desire to see and hear everything. Not from curiosity, such as moved most of the people about me, but because of some strong instinctive feeling I could not understand, as if it were my heart which had been struck and my fate which was trembling in the balance.

We were consequently among the first to hear such further details as were allowed to circulate among the now well nigh frenzied guests. No one knew the perpetrator of the deed, nor did there appear to be any direct evidence calculated to fix his identity. Indeed the sudden death of this beautiful woman in the midst of festivity might have been looked upon as suicide if the jewel had not been missing from her breast and the instrument of death removed from the wound. So far the casual search which had been instituted had failed to produce this weapon. But the police would be here soon and then something would be done.

As to the means of entrance employed by the assassin, there seemed to be but one opinion. The alcove contained a window opening upon a small balcony. By this he had doubtless entered and escaped. The long plush curtains, which during the early part of the evening had remained looped back on either side of the casement, were found at the moment of the crime's discovery closely drawn together. Certainly a suspicious circumstance. However, the question was one easily settled. If any one had approached by the balcony there would be marks in the snow to show it. Mr. Ramsdell had gone out to see. He would be coming back soon.

"Do you think this a probable explanation of the crime?" I demanded of Mr. Durand at this juncture. "If I remember rightly, this window overlooks the carriage drive. It must therefore be within plain sight of the door through which some 300 guests have passed tonight. How could any one climb to such a height, lift the window and step in without being seen?"

"You forget the awning." He spoke quickly and with unexpected vivacity. The awning runs up very near this window and quite shuts it off from the sight of arriving guests. The drivers of departing carriages could see it if they chanced to glance back. But their eyes are usually on their horses in such a crowd. The probabilities are against any of them having looked up." His brow had cleared; a weight seemed removed from his mind. "When I went into the alcove to see Mrs. Fairbrother she was sitting in a chair near this window looking out. I remember the effect of her splendor against the snow sifting down in a steady stream behind her—the pink velvet, the soft green of the curtains on either side, her brilliants and the snow for a background. Yes, the murderer came in that way. Her figure would be plain to any one outside, and if she moved and the diamond shone— Don't you see what a probable theory it is? There must be ways by which a desperate man might reach that balcony. I believe"—

How eager he was and with what a look he turned when the word came filtering through the crowd that, though footsteps had been found in the snow pointing directly toward the balcony, there was none on the balcony itself, proving, as any one could see, that the attack had not come from without, since no one could enter the alcove by the window without stepping on the balcony.

"Mr. Durand has suspicions of his own," I explained determinedly to myself. "He met some one going in as he stepped out. Shall I ask him to name this person?" No, I did not have the courage, not while his face wore so stern a look and was so resolutely turned away.

The next excitement was a request from Mr. Ramsdell for us all to go into the drawing room. This led to various cries from hysterical lips, such as, "We are going to be searched!" "He believes the thief and murderer to be still in the house!" "Do you see the diamond on me?" "Why don't they confine their suspicions to the favored few who were admitted to the alcove?"

"They will," remarked some one close to my ear.

But quickly as I turned I could not guess from whom the comment came. Possibly from a much bedowered, bejeweled, elderly dame whose eyes were fixed on Mr. Durand's averted face. If so, she received a defiant look from mine, which I do not believe she forgot in a hurry.

Alas, it was not the only curious, I might say searching, glance I surprised directed against him as we made our way to where I could see my uncle struggling to reach us from a short side hall. The whisper seemed to have gone about that Mr. Durand had been the last one to converse with Mrs. Fairbrother prior to the tragedy.

In time I had the satisfaction of joining my uncle. He betrayed great relief at the sight of me, and, encouraged by his kindly smile, I introduced Mr. Durand. My conscious air must have produced its impression, for he turned a startled and inquiring look upon my companion, then took me resolutely on his own arm, saying:

"There is likely to be some unpleasantness ahead for all of us. I do not think the police will allow any one to go till that diamond has been looked for. This is a very serious matter, dear. So many think the murderer was one of the guests."

"I think so, too," said I. But why I thought so or why I should say so with such vehemence I do not know even now.

My uncle looked surprised.

"You had better not advance any opinions," he advised. "A lady like yourself should have none on a subject so grewsome. I shall never cease regretting bringing you here tonight. I shall seize on the first opportunity to take you home. At present we are supposed to await the action of our host."

"He cannot keep all these people here long," I ventured.

"No. Most of us will be relieved soon. Had you not better get your wraps so as to be ready to go as soon as he gives the word?"

"I should prefer to have a peep at the people in the drawing room first," was my perverse reply. "I don't know why I want to see them, but I do; and, uncle, I might as well tell you now that I engaged myself to Mr. Durand this evening—the gentleman with me when you first came up."

"You have engaged yourself to—to this man—to marry him, do you mean?"

I nodded, with a sly look behind to see if Mr. Durand were near enough to hear. He was not, and I allowed my enthusiasm to escape in a few quick words.

"He has chosen me," I said, "the plainest, most uninteresting puss in the whole city." My uncle smiled. "And I believe he loves me; at all events, I know that I love him."

My uncle sighed, while giving me the most affectionate of glances.

"It's a pity you should have come to this understanding tonight," said he. "He's an acquaintance of the murdered woman, and it is only right for you to know that you will have to leave him behind when you start for home. All who have been seen entering that alcove this evening will necessarily be detained here till the coroner arrives."

My uncle and I strolled toward the drawing room and as we did so we passed the library. It held but one occupant, the Englishman. He was seated before a table, and his appearance was such as precluded any attempt at intrusion, even if one had been so disposed. There was a fixity in his gaze and a frown on his powerful forehead which bespoke a mind greatly agitated. It was not for me to read that mind, much as it interested me, and I passed on chatting as if I had not the least desire to stop.

I cannot say how much time elapsed before my uncle touched me on the arm with the remark:

"The police are here in full force. I saw a detective in plain clothes look in here a minute ago. He seemed to have his eye on you. There he is again! What can he want? No, don't turn; he's gone away now."

Frightened as I had never been in all my life, I managed to keep my head up and maintain an indifferent aspect. What, as my uncle said, could a detective want of me? I had nothing to do with the crime; not in the remotest way could I be said to be connected with it; why, then, had I caught the attention of the police? Looking about I sought Mr. Durand. He had left me on my uncle's coming up, but had remained, as I supposed, within sight. But at this moment he was nowhere to be seen. Was I afraid on his account? Impossible; yet—

Happily just then the word was passed about that the police had given orders that, with the exception of such as had been requested to remain to answer questions, the guests generally should feel themselves at liberty to depart.

The time had now come to take a stand and I informed my uncle, to his evident chagrin, that I should not leave as long as any excuse could be found for staying.

He said nothing at the time, but as the noise of departing carriages gradually lessened and the great hall and drawing rooms began to wear a look of desertion he at last ventured on this gentle protest:

"You have more pluck, Rita, than I supposed. Do you think it wise to stay on here? Will not people imagine that you have been requested to do so? Look at those waiters hanging about in the different doorways. Run up and put on your wraps. Mr. Durand will come to the house fast enough as soon as he is released. I give you leave to sit up for him if you will. Only let us leave this place before that impertinent little man dares to come around again," he artfully added.

But I stood firm, though somewhat moved by his final suggestion, and being a small tyrant in my way, at least with him, I carried my point.

Suddenly my anxiety became poignant. A party of men, among whom I saw Mr. Durand, appeared at the end of the hall, led by a very small but self important personage whom my uncle immediately pointed out as the detective who had twice come to the door near which I stood. As this man looked up and saw me still there, a look of relief crossed his face, and after a word or two with another stranger of seeming authority he detached himself from the group he had ushered upon the scene and approaching me respectfully enough said with a deprecatory glance at my uncle whose frown he doubtless understood:

"Miss Van Arsdale, I believe?"

I nodded, too choked to speak.

"I am sorry, madam, if you were expecting to go. Inspector Dalzell has

"I am sorry, madam, if you were expecting to go."

arrived and would like to speak to you. Will you step into one of these rooms? Not the library, but any other. He will come to you as quickly as he can."

I tried to carry it off bravely and as if I saw nothing in this summons which was unique or alarming. But I succeeded only in dividing a wavering glance between him and the group of men of which he had just formed a part. In the latter were several gentlemen whom I had noted in Mrs. Fairbrother's train early in the evening and a few strangers, two of whom were officials. Mr. Durand was with the former, and his expression did not encourage me.

(Continued Next Week.)

Homebuilders will find the best bargains in Blair street addition. Make your own terms; pay for your lot or acre tract out of your monthly savings. tf