

The Woman In the Alcove

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN,

Author of "The Mistletoe Baby," "The Filigree Ball," "The House in the Mist," "The Amethyst Box," Etc.

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"The affair is very serious," exclaimed the detective on leaving me. "That's the worst case for any trouble we may be called upon to handle."

"I looked up my uncle's arm. "The worst case shall we go?" I asked. "The worst case is too large. In this case my eyes are forever traveling in the direction of the alcove. Don't you know what room? Oh, what a waste of time!"

"I can be serious, nothing important," answered my good uncle. "Somebody such as you can answer in a minute. A little room? Yes, I know it. It is under the stairs. Come, I will show you the door for you. Why did you never come to this wretched hall?"

"I had no answer for this. Why, indeed?"

"My uncle, who is a very patient man, led me to the place he had picked out without adding a word to the explanation in which he had just expressed his impatience to expend itself. He opened the door and out of the room peering eyes and listening ears were allowed a sigh to escape him as he expressed the fullness of his sympathy."

"I began and stopped. "I shall be again come to a pause—do you know?"

"What? I managed to ask."

"That I do not like Mr. Durand and that others do not like him."

"I became because of something you knew him before tonight?"

"I made no answer."

"I became he was seen, like many gentlemen, talking with that woman some time before—a long time before she was attacked for her diamond and murdered?"

"You mean, my dear, he was the man seen talking to her. Some may yet be found who went in the room the last. Mr. Hainsdell will tell me so."

"I exclaimed in the heat of my long suppressed indignation. "I am willing to stake my own integrity and honor. No man would talk to me as he did early in evening with any vile intentions. He was interested, no doubt, in many others, in one who had the appearance of being a captivating woman."

"I opened in sudden alarm. A look crossed my uncle's face which assured me that we were no longer alone. Who could have entered so silently in some trepidation I turned to a gentleman standing in the doorway, who smiled as I met his eyes."

"This Miss Van Arsdale?" he asked.

"Instantly my courage, which had seemed to leave me, returned and I said, "Are you the inspector?"

"Inspector Dabzell," he explained, "is a law, which included my uncle. He has closed the door."

"I hope I have not frightened you," I went on, approaching my uncle with a tremulous air. "A little matter has been up concerning which I mean to perfectly frank with you. It may be of trivial importance; if you will pardon my disturbing you, I demand you know him?"

"I am engaged to him," I declared. "The poor uncle could raise his hand. We are engaged to him. Well, that is difficult, and yet, in some respects, easier for me to ask a certain question."

"I must have made it more difficult than I may, for he did not proceed to this question immediately, but he said, "I know that Mr. Durand visited Mr. Fairbrother in the alcove a little while before her death?"

"I have been told so."

"It was seen to go in, but I have not found any one who saw him enter; consequently we have been unable to fix the exact minute when he did so. What is the matter, Miss Van Arsdale? You want to say something?"

"I protested, recomposing myself. "Then, as I met his eyes, I can probably tell you that I am sure he would not hesitate to ask him later," was the inspector's response. "Meanwhile, my eye was so assured me that since that time he has not trusted you with a word. I have no objection to your article to keep—No, no, I do not mean the diamond," he broke in, very evident dismay, as I fell back on my knees in irrepressible indignation. "The diamond—well, we will look for that later; it is another matter. Mr. Durand might very well be taken in his hand without realizing what he was doing. As it is important for us to find this article, let us see if we might very naturally have passed over to you when you had yourself in the hall with it. I have ventured to ask you if this article is correct."

"I do not," I retorted fiercely, glad to speak from my very heart. "He has given me nothing to keep for myself."

"That peculiar look in the inspector's eye? Why did he reach out

for a chair and seat me in it before he took up my interrupted sentence and finished it?"

"I would not give you anything to hold which had belonged to another woman? Miss Van Arsdale, you do not know men. They do many things which a young, trusting girl like yourself would hardly expect from them."

"Not Mr. Durand," I maintained stoutly.

"Perhaps not; let us hope not." Then, with a quick change of manner, he bent toward me, with a sidelong look at my uncle, and pointing to my gloves, remarked, "You wear gloves. Did you carry the need of two pairs, that you carry another in that pretty bag hanging from your arm?"

"I started, looked down, and then slowly drew up into my hand the bag he had mentioned. The white finger of a glove was protruding from the top. Any one could see it; many probably had. What did it mean? I had brought no extra pair with me."

"This is not mine," I began, faking a gloom as I perceived my uncle turn and walk a step or two away.

"The article you are looking for," pursued the inspector, "is a pair of long white gloves, supposed to have been worn by Mrs. Fairbrother when she entered the alcove. Do you mind showing me those, a finger of which I see?"

"I dropped the bag into his hand. The room and everything in it was whirling around me. But when I noted what trouble it was to his clumsy fingers to open it my senses returned and, reaching for the bag, I pulled it open and snatched out the gloves. They had been hastily rolled up, and some of the fingers were showing.

"Let me have them," he said.

"With quaking heart and shaking fingers I handed over the gloves."

"Mrs. Fairbrother's hand was not a small one," he observed as he slowly unrolled them. "Yours is. We can soon tell."

But that sentence was never finished. As the gloves fell open in his grasp he



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CHAPTER III.

WITH benumbed senses and a dismayed heart, I stared at the fallen jewel as at some hateful thing menacing both my life and honor.

"I have had nothing to do with it," I vehemently declared. "I did not put the gloves in my bag, nor did I know the diamond was in them. I fainted at the first alarm and—"

"There, there, I know," interposed the inspector kindly. "I do not doubt the truth of that. Miss Van Arsdale, you had better let your uncle take you home. I will see that the hall is clear for you. Tomorrow I may write to you again, but I will spare you all further importunity tonight."

I shook my head. It would require more courage to leave at that moment than to stay. Meeting the inspector's eye firmly, I quietly declared:

"If Mr. Durand's good name is to suffer in any way, I will not forsake him. I have confidence in his integrity. If you have not, which I do not, I will have none, as I fell back on my knees in irrepressible indignation. "The diamond—well, we will look for that later; it is another matter. Mr. Durand might very well be taken in his hand without realizing what he was doing. As it is important for us to find this article, let us see if we might very naturally have passed over to you when you had yourself in the hall with it. I have ventured to ask you if this article is correct."

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