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.

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CHAPTER IV—(Continued.)

"No, no! God, yes!" he cried. "Would you have me leave Miss Van Arsdale one minute longer than is necessary to such dreadful doubts? Rita—Miss Van Arsdale—weakness and weakness only has brought me into my present position. I did not kill Mrs. Fairbrother nor did I knowingly take her diamond, though appearances look that way, as I am very ready to acknowledge. I did go to her in the alcove, not once, but twice, and these are my reasons for doing so: About three months ago a certain well known man of enormous wealth came to me with the request that I should procure for him a diamond of superior beauty. He wished to give it to his wife, and he wished it to outshine any which could now be found in New York. This meant sending abroad—an expense he was quite willing to incur on the sole condition that the stone should not disappoint him when he saw it and that it was to be in his hands on the 18th of March, his wife's birthday. Never before had I had such an opportunity for a large stroke of business. Naturally elated, I entered at once into correspondence with the best known dealers on the other side, and last week a diamond was delivered to me which seemed to fill all the necessary requirements. I had never seen a finer stone and was consequently rejoicing in my success when some one, I do not remember who now, chanced to speak in my hearing of the wonderful stone possessed by a certain Mrs. Fairbrother—a stone so large, so brilliant and so precious altogether that she seldom wore it, though it was known to connoisseurs and had a great reputation at Tiffany's, where it had once been sent for some alteration in the setting. Was this stone larger and finer than the one I had procured with so much trouble? If so, my labor had all been in vain, for my patron must have known of this diamond and would expect to see it surpassed.

"I was so upset by this possibility that I resolved to see the jewel and make comparisons for myself. I found a friend who agreed to introduce me to the lady. She received me very graciously and was amiable enough until the subject of diamonds was broached, when she immediately stiffened and left me without an opportunity of proffering my request. However, on every other subject she was affable, and I found it easy enough to pursue the acquaintance till we were almost on friendly terms. But I never saw the diamond, nor would she talk about it, though I caused her some surprise when one day I drew out before her eyes the one I had procured for my patron and made her look at it. 'Fine,' she cried, 'fine!' But I failed to detect any envy in her manner, and I knew that I had not achieved the object set me by my wealthy customer. This was a woeful disappointment; yet, as Mrs. Fairbrother never wore her diamond, it was among the possibilities that he might be satisfied with the very fine gem I had obtained for him, and, influenced by this hope, I met him this morning a request to come and see it tomorrow. Tonight I attended this ball, and almost as soon as I entered the drawing room I hear that Mrs. Fairbrother is present and is wearing her famous jewel. What could you expect of me? Why, that I would make an effort to see it and so be ready with a reply to my exacting customer when he should ask me tomorrow if the stone I showed him had a rival. I knew in the city. But she was not in the drawing room then, and later I have interested elsewhere"—here he cast a look at me—"so that half the evening passed before I had an opportunity to join her in the so called alcove, where I had seen her set up her miniature court. What passed between us in the short interview we held together you will find me prepared to state, if necessary. It was chiefly marked by the one short view I succeeded in obtaining of her marvelous diamond, in spite of the pains she took to hide it from me by some natural movement whenever she caught my eyes leaving her face. But in that one short look I had seen enough. This was a gem for a collector, not to be worn for a royal presence. How had it come by it? And could Mr. Smythe expect me to procure him a stone like this?

"In my confusion I arose to depart. The lady showed a disposition to detain me and began chatting so vivaciously that I scarcely noticed that she was all the time engaged in drawing on her gloves. Indeed, I almost forgot the jewel, possibly because her movements hid it so completely, and only remembered it when with a sudden turn from the window, where she had gone to watch the falling flakes, she pressed the gloves into my hand with this coquettish request that I would take care of them for her. I smiled as I took them of striving to catch another glimpse of the stone, whose brilliancy had dazzled me, but she had opened her fan between us. A moment after, thinking I heard approaching steps, I quitted the room. That was my first visit."

He stopped, possibly for breath. It was easy to judge to what extent I was impressed by his account, the inspector seized the opportunity to ask if Mrs. Fairbrother had been standing any of this time with her back to him, to which he answered yes, while they were in the window.

"Long enough for her to pluck off the jewel and thrust it into the gloves if she had so wished?"

"Quite long enough."

"But you did not see her do this?"

"I did not."

"And so took the gloves without suspicion?"

"Entirely so."

"And carried them away?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Without thinking that she might want them the next minute?"

"I doubt if I was thinking seriously of her at all. My thoughts were on my own disappointment."

"Did you carry these gloves out in your hand?"

"No, in my pocket."

"I see. And you met"—

"No one. The sound I heard must have come from the rear hall."

"And there was nobody on the steps?"

"No. A gentleman was standing at their foot—Mr. Grey, the Englishman—but his face was turned another way, and he looked as if he had been in that same position for several minutes."

"Did this gentleman—Mr. Grey—see you?"

"I cannot say, but I doubt it. He appeared to be in a sort of dream. There were other people about, but nobody with whom I was acquainted."

"Very good. Now for the second visit you acknowledge having paid this unfortunate lady."

The inspector's voice was hard. I clung a little more tightly to my uncle, and Mr. Durand, after one agonizing glance my way, drew himself up as if quite conscious that he had entered upon the most serious part of the struggle.

"I had forgotten the gloves in my hurried departure; but presently I remembered them, and grew very uneasy. I did not like carrying this woman's property about with me. I had engaged myself, an hour before, to Miss Van Arsdale, and was very anxious to rejoin her. The gloves worried me, and finally, after a little aimless wandering through the various rooms, I determined to go back and restore them to their owner. The doors of the supper room had just been flung open, and the end of the hall near the alcove was comparatively empty, save for a certain quizzical friend of mine, whom I saw sitting with his partner on the yellow divan. I did not want to encounter him just then, for he had already joked me about my admiration for the lady with the diamond, so I conceived the idea of approaching her by means of a second entrance to the alcove, unsuspected by most of those present, but perfectly well known to me, who have been a frequent guest in this house. A door, covered by temporary draperies, connects, as you may know, this alcove with a passageway communicating directly with the hall of entrance and the upstairs dressing rooms. To go up the main stairs and come down by the side one, and so on through a small archway, was a very simple matter for me. If no early departing or late arriving guests were in that hall, I need fear but one encounter, and that was with the servant stationed at the carriage entrance. But even he was absent at this propitious instant, and I reached the door I sought without any unpleasantness. This door opened out instead of in—this I also knew when planning this surreptitious intrusion—but, after pulling it open and reaching for the curtain, which hung completely across it, I found it not so easy to proceed as I had imagined. The stealthiness of my action held back my hand; then the faint sounds I heard within advised me that she was not alone, and that she might very readily regard with displeasure my unexpected entrance by a door of which she was possibly ignorant. I tell you all this because, if by any chance I was seen hesitating in face of that curtain, doubts might have been raised which I am anxious to dispel." Here his eyes left my face for that of the inspector.

"It certainly had a bad look, that I don't deny, but I did not think of appearances then. I was too anxious to complete a task which had suddenly presented unexpected difficulties. That I listened before entering was very natural, and when I heard no voice, only something like a great sigh, I ventured to lift the curtain and step in. She was sitting, not where I had left her, but on a couch at the left of the usual entrance, her face toward me and—you know how, inspector. It was her last sigh I had heard. Horrified, for I had never looked on death before, much less crime, I reeled forward, meaning, I presume, to rush down the steps shouting for help, when, suddenly, something fell splashing on my shirt front, and I saw myself marked with a stain of blood. This both frightened and bewildered me, and it was a minute or two before I had the courage to look up. When I did do so, I saw whence this drop had come. Not from her, though the red stream was pouring down the rich folds of her dress, but from a sharp needlelike instrument which had been thrust, point downward, in the open work of an antique lantern hanging near the doorway. What had happened to me might have happened to any one who chanced to be in that spot at that special moment, but I did not realize this then. Cover-

"Horrified, I reeled forward."

ing the splash with my hands, I edged myself back to the door by which I had entered, watching those deathful eyes and crushing under my feet the remnants of some broken china with which the carpet was bestrewn. I had no thought of her, hardly any of myself. To cross the room was all; to escape as secretly as I came, before the portiere so nearly drawn between me and the main hall should stir under the hand of some curious person entering. It was my first sight of blood; my first contact with crime, and that was what I did—I fled."

The last word was uttered with a gasp. Evidently he was greatly affected by this horrible experience.

"I am ashamed of myself," he muttered, "but nothing can now undo the fact. I slid from the presence of this murdered woman as though she had been the victim of my own rage or cupidity and, being fortunate enough to reach the dressing room before the alarm had spread beyond the immediate vicinity of the alcove, found and put on the handkerchief, which made it possible for me to rush down and find Miss Van Arsdale, who somebody told me had fainted. Not till I stood over her in that remote corner beyond the supper room did I again think of the gloves. What I did when I happened to think of them you already know. I could have shown no greater cowardice if I had known that the murdered woman's diamond was hidden inside them. Yet I did not know this or even suspect it. Nor do I understand now her reason for placing it there. Why should Mrs. Fairbrother risk such an invaluable gem to the custody of one she knew so little? An unconscious custody too? Was she afraid of being murdered if she retained this jewel?"

The inspector thought a moment, and then said:

"You mean on your dread of some one entering by the one door before you could escape by the other. Do you refer to the friend you left sitting on the divan opposite?"

"No, my friend had left that seat. The portiere was sufficiently drawn for me to detect that. If I had waited a minute longer," he bitterly added, "I should have found my way open to the regular entrance and so escaped all this."

"Mr. Durand, you are not obliged to answer any of my questions, but if you wish you may tell me whether, at this moment of apprehension, you thought of the danger you ran of being seen from outside by some one of the many coachmen passing by on the driveway?"

"No; I did not even think of the window—I don't know why—but, if any one passing by did see me, I hope they saw enough to substantiate my story."

The inspector made no reply. He seemed to be thinking. I heard afterward that the curtains, looped back in the early evening, had been found hanging at full length over this window by those who first rushed in upon the scene of death. Had he hoped to entrap Mr. Durand into some damaging admission or was he merely testing his truth? His expression afforded no clew to his thoughts, and Mr. Durand, noting this, remarked with some dignity:

"I do not expect strangers to accept these explanations, which must sound strange and inadequate in face of the proof I carry of having been with that woman after the fatal weapon struck her heart. But to one who knows me, and knows me well, I can surely appeal for credence to a tale which I here declare to be as true as if I had sworn to it in a court of justice."

"Anson!" I passionately cried out, loosening my clutch upon my uncle's arm. My confidence in him had returned.

And then as I noted the inspector's businesslike air and my uncle's wavering look and unconvinced manner I felt my heart swell, and, flinging all discretion to the wind, I bounded eagerly forward. Laying my hands in those of Mr. Durand, I cried fervently:

"I believe in you. Nothing but your own words shall ever shake my confidence in your innocence."

The sweet, glad look I received was my best reply. I could leave the room after that.

But not the house. Another experience awaited me, awaited us all, before this full, eventful evening came to a close.

CHAPTER V.

I HAD gone upstairs for my wraps, my uncle having insisted on my withdrawing from a scene where my very presence seemed in some degree to compromise me.

Soon prepared for my departure, I was crossing the hall to the small door communicating with the side staircase where my uncle had promised to await me, when I felt myself seized by a desire to have another look below before leaving the place in which were centered all my deepest interests.

A wide landing, breaking up the main flight of stairs some few feet from the top, offered me an admirable point of view. With but little thought of possible consequences and no thought at all of my poor, patient uncle, I slipped down to this landing and, protected by the unusual height of its balustrade, allowed myself a parting glance at the scene with which my most poignant memories were henceforth to be connected.

Before me lay the large square of the central hall. Opening out from this was the corridor leading to the front door and incidentally to the library. As my glance ran down this corridor I beheld approaching from the room just mentioned the tall figure of the Englishman.

He halted as he reached the main hall and stood gazing eagerly at a group of men and women clustered near the fireplace, a group on which I no sooner cast my own eye than my attention also became fixed.

The inspector had come from the room where I had left him with Mr. Durand and was showing to these people the extraordinary diamond, which he had just recovered under such remarkable if not suspicious circumstances. Young heads and old were meeting over it, and I was straining my ears to hear such comments as were audible above the general hubbub, when Mr. Grey made a quick move, and I looked his way again in time to mark his air of concern and the uncertainty he showed whether to advance or retreat.

Unconscious of my watchful eye and noting no doubt that most of the persons in the group on which his own eye was leveled stood with their backs toward him, he made no effort to disguise his profound interest in the stone. His eye followed its passage from hand to hand with a covetous eagerness of which he may not have been aware, and I was not at all surprised when, after a short interval of troubled indecision, he impulsively stepped forward and begged the privilege of handling the gem himself.

Our host, who stood not far from the inspector, said something to that gentleman which led to this request being complied with. The stone was passed over to Mr. Grey, and I saw, possibly because my heart was in my eyes, that the great man's hand trembled as it touched his palm. Indeed, his whole frame trembled, and I was looking eagerly for the result of his inspection when, on his turning to hold the jewel up to the light, something happened so abnormal and so strange that no one who was fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to be present in the house at that instant will ever forget it.

This something was a cry, coming from no one knew where, which, unearthly in its shrillness and the power it had on the imagination, reverberated through the house and died away in a wail so weird, so thrilling and so prolonged that it gripped not only my own nerveless and weakened heart, but those of the ten strong men congregated below me. The diamond dropped from Mr. Grey's hand, and neither he nor any one else moved to pick it up. Not till silence had come again—a silence almost as unendurable to the sensitive ear as the cry which had preceded it—did any one stir or think of the gem. Then one gentleman after another bent to look for it, but with no success, till one of the waiters, who possibly had followed it with his eye or caught sight of its sparkle on the edge of the rug, whither it had rolled, sprang and picked it up and handed it back to Mr. Gray.

Instinctively the Englishman's hand closed on it, but it was very evident to me, and I think to all, that his interest in it was gone. If he looked at it he did not see it, for he stood like one stunned all the time that agitated men and women were running hither and thither in unavailing efforts to locate the sound yet ringing in their ears. Not till these various searchers had all come together again, in terror of a mystery they could not solve, did he let his hand fall and himself awake to the scene about him.

The words he at once gave utterance to were as remarkable as all the rest.

"Gentlemen," said he, "you must pardon my agitation. This cry—you need not seek its source—is one to which I am only too well accustomed. I have been the happy father of six children. Five I have buried, and before the death of each this same cry has echoed in my ears. I have but one child left, a daughter. She is ill at the hotel. Do you wonder that I shrink from this note of warning and show myself something less than a man under its influence? I am going home; but, first, one word about this stone." Here he lifted it and bestowed or appeared to bestow on it an anxious scrutiny, putting on his glasses and examining it carefully before passing it back to the inspector.

"I have heard," said he, with a change of tone which must have been noticeable to every one, "that this stone was a very superior one and quite worthy of the fame it bore here in America. But, gentlemen, you have all been greatly deceived in it; no one more than he who was willing to commit murder for its possession. The stone which you have just been good enough to allow me to inspect is no diamond, but a carefully manufactured bit of paste not worth the rich and elaborate setting which has been given to it. I am sorry to be the one to say this, but I have made a study of precious stones, and I cannot let this bare faced imitation pass through my hands without a protest. Mr. Ramsdell," this to our host, "I beg you will allow me to utter my excuses and depart at once. My daughter is worse—this I know as certainly as that I am standing here. The cry you have heard is the one superstition of our family. Pray God that I find her alive!"

After this what could be said? Though no one who had heard him, not even my own romantic self, showed any belief in this interpretation of the remarkable sound that had just gone thrilling through the house, yet, in face of his declared acceptance of it as a warning and the fact that all efforts had failed to locate the sound or even to determine its source, no other course seemed open but to let this distinguished man depart with the suddenness his superstitious fears demanded.

That this was in opposition to the inspector's wishes was evident enough. Naturally he would have preferred Mr. Grey to remain, if only to make clear his surprising conclusions in regard to a diamond which had passed through the hands of some of the best judges in the country without a doubt having been raised as to its genuineness.

With his departure the inspector's manner changed. He glanced at the stone in his hand and slowly shook his head.

"I doubt if Mr. Grey's judgment can be depended on tonight," said he and pocketed the gem as carefully as if his belief in its real value had been but little disturbed by the assertions of this renowned foreigner.

I have no distinct remembrance of how I finally left the house or of what passed between my uncle and myself on our way home. I was numb with the shock, and neither my intelligence nor my feelings were any longer active. I recall but one impression, and that was the effect made on me by my old home on our arrival there, as of something new and strange, so much had happened and such changes had taken place in myself since leaving it five hours before. But nothing else is vivid in my remembrance till that early hour of the dreary morning when, on waking to the world with a cry, I beheld my uncle's anxious figure bending over me from the footboard.

Instantly I found tongue and question after question leaped from my lips. He did not answer them. He could not. But when I grew feverish and insistent he drew the morning paper from behind his back and laid it quietly down within my reach. I felt calmed in an instant, and when after a few affectionate words he left me to myself I seized on the sheet and read what so many others were reading at that moment throughout the city.

I spare you the account so far as it coincides with what I had myself seen and heard the night before. A few particulars which had not reached my ears will interest you. The instrument of death found in the place designated by Mr. Durand was one of note to such as had any taste or knowledge of curios. It was a stiletto of the most delicate type, long, keen and slender, not an American product, not even of this century's manufacture, but a relic of the days when deadly thrusts were given in the corners and byways of medieval streets.

This made the first mystery.

The second was the as yet unexplainable presence on the alcove floor of two broken coffee cups, which no waiter nor any other person, in fact, admitted having carried there. The tray, which had fallen from Peter Mooney's hand—the waiter who had been the first to give the alarm of murder—had held no cups, only ices. This was a fact, proved. But the handles of two cups had been found among the debris—cups which must have been full from the size of the coffee stain left on the rug where they had fallen.

In reading this I remembered that Mr. Durand had mentioned stepping on some broken pieces of china in his escape from the fatal scene, and, struck with this confirmation of a theory which was slowly taking form in my own mind, I passed on to the next paragraph with a sense of expectation.

The result was a surprise. Others may have been told, I was not, that Mrs. Fairbrother had received a communication from outside only a few minutes previous to her death. A Mr. Fullerton, who had preceded Mr. Durand in his visit to the alcove, owned to having opened the window for her at some call or signal from outside and taken in a small piece of paper which he saw lifted up from below on the end of a whip handle. He could not see who held the whip, but at Mrs. Fairbrother's entreaty he unpinned the note and gave it to her. While she was puzzling over it, for it was apparently far from legible, he took another look out in time to mark a figure ride from below toward the carriage drive. He did not recognize the figure nor would he know it again. As to the nature of the communication itself he could say nothing, save that Mrs. Fairbrother did not seem to be affected favorably by it. She frowned and was looking very gloomy when he left the alcove. Asked if he had pulled the curtains together after closing the window, he said that he had not; that she had not requested him to do so.

This story, which was certainly a strange one, had been confirmed by the testimony of the coachman who had lent his whip for the purpose. This coachman, who was known to be a man of extreme good nature, had seen no harm in lending his whip to a poor devil who wished to give a telegram or some such hasty message to the lady sitting just above them in a lighted window. The wind was fierce and the snow blinding, and it was natural that the man should duck his head, but he remembered his appearance well enough to say that he was either very cold or very much done up and that he wore a greatcoat with the collar pulled up about his ears. When he came back with the whip he seemed more cheerful than when he asked for it, but had no "thank you" for the favor done him, or if he had it was lost in his throat and the piercing gale.

The communication, which was regarded by the police as a matter of the highest importance, had been found in her hand by the coroner. It was a mere scrawl written in pencil on a small scrap of paper. The following facsimile of the scrawl was given to the public in the hope that some one would recognize the handwriting:

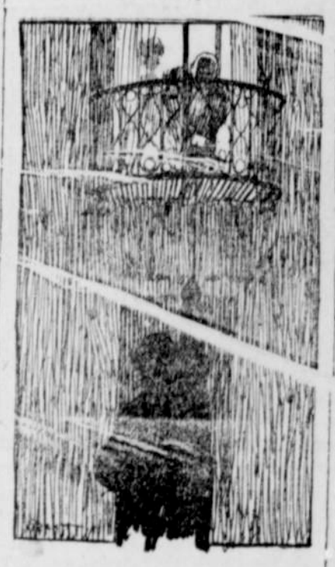
The first two lines overlapped and were confused, but the last one was clear enough. Expect trouble if— If what? Hundreds were asking the question at this very moment. I should soon be asking it, too, but first I must make an effort to understand the situation—a situation which up to now appeared to involve Mr. Durand, and Mr. Durand only, as the suspected party.

This was no more than I expected, yet it came with a shock under the broad glare of this wintry morning, so impossible did it seem in the light of everyday life that guilt could be associated in any one's mind with a man of such unblemished record and excellent standing. But the evidence adduced against him was of a kind to appeal to the common mind—we all know that evidence—nor could I say, after reading the full account, that I was myself unaffected by its seeming weight. Not that my faith in his innocence was shaken. I had met his look of love and tender gratitude and my confidence in him had been restored, but I saw with all the clearness of a mind trained by continuous study how difficult it was going to be to counteract the prejudice induced, first, by his own inconsiderate acts, especially by that unfortunate attempt of his to secrete Mrs. Fairbrother's gloves in another woman's bag, and, secondly, by his peculiar explanations, which to many must seem forced and unnatural.

I saw and felt nerved to a superhuman task. I believed him innocent, and if others failed to prove him so I would undertake to clear him myself—I, the little Rita, with no experience of law or courts or crime, but with simply an unbounded faith in the man suspected and in the keenness of my own insight, an insight which had already served me so well and would serve me yet better once I had mastered the details which must be the prelude to all intelligent action.

The morning's report stopped with the explanations given by Mr. Durand of the appearances against him; consequently no word appeared of the after events which had made such an impression at the time on all the persons present. Mr. Grey was mentioned, but simply as one of the guests, and to no one reading this early morning issue would any doubt come as to the genuineness of the diamond which, to all appearance, had been the leading motive in the commission of this great crime.

The effect on my own mind of this



suppression was a curious one. I began to wonder if the whole event had not been a chimera of my disturbed brain—a nightmare which had visited me, and me alone, and not a fact to be reckoned with. But a moment's further thought served to clear my mind of all such doubts, and I perceived that the police had exercised only common prudence in withholding Mr. Grey's sensational opinion of the stone till it [illegible] fied by experts.

(Continued Next Week.)

C. W. Evans took the civil service examination for editorial clerk in the government census bureau. John L. Dillard, secretary of the local board of examiners, conducted the examination at the courthouse today.

McMurphey & Rugh report the sale of the T. C. Sumner place of 22 acres two miles northwest of town to Charles Sherbundy for $4000. This is one of the finest fruit orchards in Lane county, and Mr. Sherbundy is to be congratulated upon securing possession of it.

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