

# 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 VII, Continued.

"Trust me, you may count on me," said I. "You are a New York correspondent to do the right thing at the right time to head off the boys. But I doubt if they will believe me."

"In that case I shall have a barricade thrown up fifty feet down the mountain side," said he. "But the mail and your supplies?" "Oh, the burros can make their way up. You shan't suffer."

"You are certainly master," I remarked. All this time I had been using my eyes. There was not much to see, but what there was was romantically interesting. Aside from the furnace and what was going on there, there was little else but a sleeping tent, a cooking tent and the small one I had come on first, which without the least doubt contained the sick man. This last tent was of a peculiar construction and showed the primitive nature of everything at this height. It consisted simply of a cloth thrown over a thing like a trapeze. This cloth did not even come to the ground on either side, but stopped short a foot or so from the flat mound of adobe which serves as a base or floor for hut or tent in New Mexico. The rear of the simple tent abutted on the mountain side. The opening was toward the valley. I felt an intense desire to look into this opening—so intense that I thought I would venture on an attempt to gratify it.

Scrutinizing the resolute face of the man before me and flattering myself that I detected signs of humor underlying his professional brusqueness, I asked, somewhat mournfully, if he would let me go away without so much as a glance at the man I had come so far to see. "A glimpse would satisfy me now," I assured him as the hint of a twinkle flashed in his eye. "Surely there will be no harm in that. I'll take it instead of supper."

He smiled, but not encouragingly, and I was feeling very despondent indeed when the canvas on which our eyes were fixed suddenly shook, and the calm figure of a woman stepped out before us, clad in the simplest garb, but showing in every line of face and form a character of mingled kindness and shrewdness. She was evidently on the lookout for the doctor, for she made a sign as she saw him and returned instantly into the tent.

"Mr. Fairbrother has just fallen asleep," he explained. "It isn't discipline and I shall have to apologize to Miss Serra, but if you will promise not to speak nor make the least disturbance I will let you take the one peep you prefer to supper."

"I promise," said I. Leading the way to the opening, he whispered a word to the nurse, then motioned me to look in. The sight was a simple one, but to me very impressive. The owner of palaces, a man to whom millions were as thousands to whom poor devils was myself, lay on an improvised bed of evergreens, wrapped in a horse blanket and with nothing better than another of these rolled up under his head. At his side sat his nurse on what looked like the uneven stump of a tree. Close to her hand was a tolerably flat stone, on which I saw arranged a number of bottles and such other comforts as were absolutely necessary to a proper care of the sufferer.

That was all. In these few words I have told the whole story. To be sure, this simple tent, perched 7,000 feet and more above sea level, had one advantage which even his great house in New York could not offer. This was the outlook. Lying as he did facing the valley he had only to open his eyes to catch a full view of the panorama of sky and mountain stretched out before him. It was glorious; whether seen at morning, noon or night, glorious. But I doubt if he would not gladly have exchanged it for a sight of his home walls.

tor. I could not make the descent to Santa Fe on that horse that night. Did I feel elated? Rather, I had no wish to descend. Yet I was far from foreseeing what the night was to bring to me.

I was turned over to the manager, but not without a final injunction from the doctor. "Not a word to any one about your errand! Not a word about the New York tragedy, as you value Mr. Fairbrother's life!" "Not a word," said I. Then he left me.

To see the sun go down and the moon come up from a ledge hung, as it were, in mid air! The experience was novel—but I refrain. I have more important matters to relate.

I was given a bunk at the extreme end of the long sleeping tent and turned in with the rest. I expected to sleep, but on finding that I could catch a sight of the sick tent from under the canvas I experienced such fascination in watching this forbidden spot that midnight came before I had closed my eyes. Then all desire to sleep left me, for the patient began to moon and presently to talk, and the stiffness of the solitary height being something abnormal I could sometimes catch the very words. Devoid as they were of all



He motioned me to look in. I was not a wise one, the wisest perhaps which could be taken under the circumstances? What would his reply be? Would it show that he was ignorant of his wife's death as was generally believed both by those about him here and those who knew him well in New York? Or would the question convey nothing further to him than the doubt—in itself an insult—of the genuineness of that great stone which had been his pride?

A murmur—that was all it could be called—broke from his fever dried lips and died away in an inarticulate gasp. Then suddenly, sharply, a cry broke from him, an intelligible cry, and we heard him say: "No imitation! No imitation! It was a sun! A glory! No other like it! It lit the air! It blazed! It burned! I see it now! I see!"

There the passion succumbed, the strength failed. Another murmur, another, and the great void of night which stretched over—I might almost say under—us was no more quiet or seemingly impenetrable than the silence of that moon enveloped tent.

Would he speak again? I did not think so. Would he even try to make him? I did not think this either. But I did not know the woman. Softly her voice rose again. There was a dominating insistence in her tones, gentle as they were; the insistence of a healthy mind which seeks to control a weakened one.

"You do not know of any imitation, then? It was the real stone you gave her. You are sure of it. You would be ready to swear to it if—say just yes or no," she finished in gentle urgency. Evidently he was sinking again into unconsciousness, and she was just holding him back long enough for the necessary word.

none of the delirium which had hitherto rendered it unnatural. The doctor started for the tent. There was the quickness of surprise in his movement, and the gesture he made to the magistrate as he passed in re-awakened an expectation in my breast which made me doubly watchful.

Providence was intervening in our favor, and I was not surprised to see him presently reissue with the nurse, whom he drew into the shadow of the trees, where they had a short conference. If she returned alone into the tent after this conference I should know that the matter was at an end and that the doctor had decided to maintain his authority against that of the magistrate. But she remained outside, and the magistrate was invited to join their council. When they again left the shadow of the trees it was to approach the tent.

The magistrate, who was in the rear, could not have more than passed the opening, but I thought him far enough inside not to detect any movement on my part, so I took advantage of the situation to worm myself out of my corner and across the ledge to where the tent made a shadow in the moonlight. Crouching close and laying my ear against the canvas, I listened.

The nurse was speaking in a gently persuasive tone. I imagined her kneeling by the head of the patient and breathing words into his ear. These were what I heard: "You love diamonds. I have often noticed that you look so long at the ring on your hand. That is why I have let it stay there, though at times I have feared it would drop off and roll away over the adobe down the mountain side. Was I right?"

"Yes, yes," The words came with difficulty, but they were clear enough. "It's of small value. I like it because—"

He appeared to be too weak to finish. A pause, during which she seemed to edge nearer to him. "We all have some pet keepsake," said she. "But I should never have supposed this stone of yours an inexpensive one. But I forget that you are the owner of a very large and remarkable diamond, a diamond that is spoken of sometimes in the papers. Of course if you have a gem like that of one must appear very small and valueless to you."

"Yes, this is nothing, nothing," And he appeared to turn away his head. "Mr. Fairbrother! Pardon me, but I want to tell you something about that big diamond of yours. You have been ill and have not been able to read your letters, so do not know that your wife has had some trouble with that diamond. People have said that it is not a real stone, but a well executed imitation. May I write to her that this is a mistake—that it is all you have ever claimed for it—that is, an unusually large diamond of the first water?"

I listened in amazement. Surely this was an insidious way to get at the truth, a woman's way. But who would say it was not a wise one, the wisest perhaps which could be taken under the circumstances? What would his reply be? Would it show that he was ignorant of his wife's death as was generally believed both by those about him here and those who knew him well in New York? Or would the question convey nothing further to him than the doubt—in itself an insult—of the genuineness of that great stone which had been his pride?

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hanging from his saddle. It crept to and fro across the side of the opposite mountain as he threaded its endless zigzags and finally disappeared over the brow into the invisible canyons beyond.

With the disappearance of this beacon came lassitude and sleep, through whose hazy atmosphere floated wild sentences from the sick tent, which showed that the patient was back again in Nevada, quarreling over the price of a horse which was to carry him beyond the reach of some threatening avalanche.

When next morning I came to depart the doctor took me by both hands and looked me straight in the eyes. "You heard," he said. "How do you know?" I asked. "I can tell a satisfied man when I see him," he growled, throwing down my hands with that same humorous twinkle in his eyes which had encouraged me from the first.

I made no answer, but I shall remember the lesson. One detail more. When I started on my own descent I found why the ledgers with which I had been provided were so indispensable. I was not allowed to ride. Indeed, riding down those steep declivities was impossible. No horse could preserve his balance with a rider on his back. I slid, so did my horse, and only in the valley beneath did we come together again.

THE SUCCESS of this interview provoked other attempts on the part of the reporters who now flocked into the southwest. Ere long particulars began to pour in of Mr. Fairbrother's painful journey south after his illness set in. The clerk of the hotel in El Moro where the great mine owner's name was found registered at the time of the murder told a story which made very good reading for those who were more interested in the sufferings and experiences of the millionaire husband of the murdered lady than in those of the unhappy but comparatively insignificant man upon whom public opinion had cast the odium of her death.

It seemed that when the first news came of the great crime which had taken place in New York Mr. Fairbrother was absent from the hotel on a prospecting tour through the adjacent mountains. Couriers had been sent after him, and it was one of these who finally brought him into town. He had been found wandering alone on horseback among the desolates of an untraveled region, sick and almost incoherent from fever. Indeed his condition was such that neither the courier nor such others as saw him had the heart to tell him the dreadful news from New York or even to show him the papers. To their great relief he betrayed no curiosity in them. All he wanted was a berth in the first train going south, and this was an easy way for them out of a great responsibility.

They listened to his wishes and saw him safely aboard with such alacrity and with so many precautions against his being disturbed that they have never doubted that he left El Moro in total ignorance not only of the circumstances of his great bereavement, but of the bereavement itself.

This ignorance, which he appeared to have carried with him to the Placide, was regarded by those who knew him best as proving the truth of the affirmation elicited from him in the pauses of his delirium of the genuineness of the stone which had passed from his hands to those of his wife at the time of their separation, and further dispatches coming in, some private and some official, but all insisting upon the fact that it would be weeks before he would be in a condition to submit to any sort of examination on a subject so painful, the authorities in New York decided to wait no longer for his testimony, but to proceed at once with the inquest.

Great as is the temptation to give a detailed account of proceedings which were of such moment to myself and to every word of which I listened with the eagerness of a novice and the anguish of a woman who sees her lover's

Durand's possession in some of my many visits he was shown, to have made of late to various curio shops in and out of New York city. [Mr. Durand's visits to the curio shops, as explained by him, were made with a view of finding a casket in which to place his diamond. This explanation was looked upon with as much doubt as the others he had offered where the situation seemed to be of a compromising character.]

I had expected all this, just as I had expected Mr. Grey to be absent from the proceedings and his testimony ignored. But this expectation did not make the ordeal any easier, and when I noticed the effect of witness after witness leaving the stand without having improved Mr. Durand's position by a jot or offering any new view capable of turning his spirit into other directions I felt my suspicion harden and my purpose strengthen till I hardly knew myself. I must have frightened my uncle, for his hand was always on my arm and his childing voice in my ear bidding me beware not only for my own sake and his, but for that of Mr. Durand, whose eye was seldom away from my face.

The verdict, however, was not the one I had so deeply dreaded. While it did not exonerate Mr. Durand, it did not openly accuse him, and I was on the point of giving him a smile of congratulation and renewed hope when I saw my little detective, the one who had spied the gloves in my bag at the bell, advance and place his hand upon his arm.

The police had gone a step further than the coroner's jury, and Mr. Durand was arrested before my eyes on a charge of murder.

THE NEXT day saw me at police headquarters begging an interview with the inspector, with the intention of confiding to him a theory which must either cost me his sympathy or open the way to a new inquiry, which I felt sure would lead to Mr. Durand's complete exoneration.

I chose this gentleman for my confidant from among all those with whom I had been brought in contact by my position as witness in a case of this magnitude, first, because he had been present at the most tragic moment of my life, and, secondly, because I was conscious of a sympathetic bond between us which would induce me a kind bearing. However ridiculous my idea might appear to him, I was assured that he would treat me with consideration and not visit whatever folly I might be guilty of on the head of him for whom I risked my reputation for good sense.

Nor was I disappointed in this. Inspector Dalzell's air was fatherly and his tone altogether gentle as, in reply to my excuses for troubling him with my opinions, he told me that in a case of such importance he was glad to receive the impressions even of such a prejudiced little partisan as myself. The word friend, Mr. Dalzell, and so do many others, I fear, in spite of his long record for honesty and uprightness. And why? Because you will not admit the possibility of another person's guilt—a person standing so high in private and public estimation that the very idea seems preposterous and little short of insulting to the country of which he is an acknowledged ornament.

"My dear!" The inspector had actually risen. His expression and whole attitude showed shock. But I did not quail; I only subdued my manner and spoke with quieter conviction. "I am aware," said I, "how words so daring must impress you. But listen, sir; listen to what I have to say before you utterly condemn me. I acknowledge that it is the frightful position into which I threw Mr. Durand by my officious attempt to right him which has driven me to make this second effort to fix the crime on the only other man who had possible access to Mrs. Fairbrother at the fatal moment. How could I live in inaction? How could you expect me to weigh for a moment this foreigner's reputation against that of my own lover? If I have reasons—"

"Reasons which would appeal to all. In return of this person's having an international reputation at his back he had been a simple gentleman like Mr. Durand would you not consider me entitled to speak?" "Certainly, but—" "You have no confidence in my reasons, inspector. They may not weigh against that splash of blood on Mr. Durand's shirt front, but such as they are I must give them. But first it will be necessary for you to accept for as true Mr. Durand's statements as mine. Are you willing to do this?" "I will try."

In his face that, if nothing more had occurred that night, gave prominence to this woman and her diamond. I should have carried home the conviction that interests of no common import lay behind a feeling so extraordinarily displayed.

"Fanciful, my dear Miss Van Arsdale! Interesting, but fanciful." "I know. I have not yet touched on fact. But facts are coming, inspector." He stared. Evidently he was not accustomed to hear the law laid down in this fashion by a midwife of my proportions. "Go on," said he. "Happily, I have no clerk here to listen."

"I would not speak if you had. These are words for but one ear as yet. Not even my uncle suspects the direction of my thoughts." "Proceed," he again enjoined. Upon which I plunged into my subject.

"Mrs. Fairbrother wore the real diamond, and no imitation, to the ball. Of this I feel sure. The bit of glass or paste I discovered to the coroner's jury was bright enough, but it was not the star of light I saw burning on her breast as she passed me on her way to the alcove."

"Miss Van Arsdale!" "The interest which Mr. Durand displayed in it, the marked excitement into which he was thrown by his first view of its size and splendor, confirm in my mind the evidence which he gave on oath (and he is a well-known diamond expert, you know, and must have been very well aware that he would injure rather than help his cause by this admission) that at that time he believed the stone to be real and of immense value. Wearing such a gem, then, she entered the fatal alcove, and with a smile on her face prepared to employ her fascinations on whoever chanced to come within their reach. But now something happened. Please let me tell it my own way. A shout from the driveway, or a bit of snow thrown against the window, drew her attention to a man standing below, holding up a note fastened to the end of a whip handle. I do not know whether or not you have found that man. If you have—" The inspector made no sign. "I judge that you have not, so I may go on with my suppositions. Mrs. Fairbrother took in this for this reason chose the alcove to sit in, or it may have been a surprise to her. Probably we shall never know the whole truth about it; but what we can know and do, if you are still holding to our compact and viewing this crime in the light of Mr. Durand's explanations, is that it made a change in her and made her anxious to rid herself of the diamond. It has been decided that the hurried servant should read, 'Take warning.' He means to do it at the ball. Expect trouble if you do not give him the diamond, or something to that effect."

"But why was it passed up to her unfinished? Was the haste so great? I hardly think so. I believe in another explanation which points with startling directness to the possibility that the communication was not Mr. Durand, but one whom I need not name, and that the reason you have failed to find the messenger of whose appearance you have received definite information, is that you have not looked among the servants of a certain distinguished residence in town. Oh, I burst forth with feverish volubility as I saw the inspector's lips open to what could not fall to be a sarcastic utterance. "I know what you feel tempted to reply. Why should a servant deliver a warning against his own master? If you will be patient with me, you will see, but first I wish to make clear that Mrs. Fairbrother, having received this warning just before Mr. Durand appeared in the alcove—reckless, scheming woman that she was—sought to rid herself of the object against which it was directed in the way we have temporarily accepted as true. Relying on her arts and possibly misestimating the nature of Mr. Durand's interest in her, she hands over the diamond hidden in her rolled up gloves, which he without suspicion carries away with him, thus linking himself indissolubly to a great crime of which another was the perpetrator. That other, or so I believe from my very heart of hearts, was the man I saw leaning against the wall at the foot of the alcove a few minutes before I passed into the supper room."

I stopped with a gasp, hardly able to meet the stern and frowning look with which the inspector sought to restrain what he evidently considered the senseless ravings of a child. But I had proceeded before the rebuke thus expressed could formulate itself into words. "I have some excuse for a declaration so monstrous. Perhaps I am the only person who can satisfy you in regard to a certain fact about which you have expressed some curiosity. Inspector, have you ever solved the mystery of the two broken coffee cups found among the debris at Mrs. Fairbrother's feet? It did not come out in the inquest, I noticed."

"Not yet," he cried, "but you cannot tell me anything about them?" "Possibly not. But I can tell you this: When I reached the supper room that evening I looked back and, providentially or otherwise—only the future can determine that—detected Mr. Grey in the act of lifting two cups from a tray left by some waiter on a table standing just outside the reception room door. I did not see where he carried them. I only saw his face turned toward the alcove, and as there was no other lady there or anywhere near there I have dared to think—" Here the inspector found speech.

"You saw Mr. Grey lift two cups and turn toward the alcove at a moment we all know to have been critical? You should have told me this before. He may be a possible witness."

I scarcely listened. I was too full of my own argument. "There were other people in the hall, especially at my end of it. A perfect throng was coming from the billiard room, where the dancing had been, and it might easily be that he caught both enter and leave that scintillating spot without attracting attention. He had shown too early and much too unmistakably his lack of interest in the general company for his every movement to be watched as at his first arrival. But this is simple conjecture. What I have to say next is evidence. The stiletto—have you studied it, sir? I have, and among the devices on the handle is one that especially attracted my attention. See! This is what I mean." And I handed him a drawing which I had made with some care in expectation of this very interview.

He surveyed it with some astonishment. "I understand," I pursued in trembling tones, for I was much affected



He surveyed it with some astonishment. by my own daring, "that no one has as far succeeded in tracing this weapon to its owner. Why didn't your experts study heraldry and the devices of great houses? They would have found that this one is not unknown in England. I can tell you on whose blazon it can often be seen and so could—Mr. Grey."

CHAPTER X. I WAS NOT the only one to tremble now. This man of infinite experience and daily contact with crime had turned as pale as ever I myself had done in face of a threatening calamity.

"I shall see about this," he muttered, crumpling the paper in his hand. "But this is a very terrible business you are plunging me into. I sincerely hope that you are not heedlessly misreading me."

"I am correct in my facts, if that is what you mean," said I. "The stiletto is an English heirloom and bears on its blade, among other devices, that of Mr. Grey's family on the female side. But that is not all I want to say. If the blow was struck to obtain the diamond, the shock of not finding it on his victim must have been terrible. Now, Mr. Grey's heart, if my whole theory is not utterly false, was set upon obtaining this stone. Your eye was not on him as mine was when you made your appearance in the hall with the recovered jewel. He showed astonishment, eagerness and a determination which finally led him forward as you know with the request to take the diamond in his hand. Why did he want to take it in his hand? And why, having taken it, did he drop it—a diamond supposed to be worth an ordinary man's fortune? Because he was startled by a cry he chose to consider the traditional one of his family proclaiming death? Is it likely, sir, if it is conceivable even that any such cry as we heard could, in this day and generation, ring through such an assembly, unless it came with ventriloquist power from his own lips? You observed that he turned his back; that his face was hidden from us. Discreet and reticent as we have all been and careful in our criticism of so bizarre an event, there still must be many to question the reality of such superstitious fears and some to ask if such a sound could be without human agency and a very guilty agency too. Inspector, I am but a child in your estimation, and I feel my position in this matter much more keenly than you do, but I would not be true to the man whom I have unwittingly helped to place in his present unenviable position if I did not tell you that in my judgment this cry was a spurious one, employed by the gentleman himself as an excuse for dropping the stone."

"And why should he wish to drop the stone?" "Because of the fraud he perpetrated. Because it offered him an opportunity for substituting a false stone for the real. Did you not notice a change in the aspect of this jewel dating from this very moment? Did it shine with as much brilliancy in your hand when you received it back as when you possessed it over?"

"Nonsense! I do not know; it is all too absurd for argument." Yet he did stop to argue, saying in the next breath: "You forget that the stone has a setting. Would you claim that this gentleman of family, place and social distinction had planned this hideous crime with sufficient premeditation to have provided himself with the exact counterpart of a brooch which it is highly improbable he ever saw? You would make him out a Callisto or something worse. Miss Van Arsdale, I fear your theory will topple over of its own weight."

He was very patient with me; he did not show me the door. (Continued Next Week.) Dr. Philip Bartle has arrived from Arce, where he has been ill for a couple of weeks with appendicitis. He is much better.