

# 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 XIV—(Continued.)

of course I went, but I cast him an appealing look as I did so. It evidently had its effect, for his expression changed as his hand fell on the door-knob. Would he snap the lock tight, and so shut me out from what concerned me as much as it did any one in the whole world, or would he recognize my anxiety—the necessity I was under of knowing just the ground I was standing on—and let me hear what this man had to report?

I watched the door. It closed slowly, but not so slowly to latch. Would he catch it anew by the knob? No; he left it thus, and while the crack was hardly perceptible, I felt confident that the least shake of the door would widen it and give me the opportunity I sought. But I did not have to wait for this. The two men in the office had just left began to speak and, to my unbounded relief, were sufficiently intelligible even now to warrant me in giving them my fullest attention.

After some expressions of astonishment on the part of the inspector as to the sight in which the other presented himself, the latter broke out:

"I've just escaped death! I'll tell you about that later. What I want to tell you now is that the man we want is in town. I saw him last night or his shadow, which is the same thing. It was in the house in Eighty-sixth street, the house they all think closed. Because in with a boy and—"

"Wait! You have him?"

"No. It's a long story, sir."

"Tell it."

The tone was dry. The inspector was evidently disappointed.

"Don't blame me (if you hear," said the other. "He is no common crook. This is how it was: You wanted the woman's photograph and a specimen of his writing. I knew no better place to look for them than in his own room in Mr. Fairbrother's house. I accordingly got the necessary warrant and late last evening undertook the job. I went alone—I was always an egotistical chap, more's the pity—and with no further precaution than a passing explanation to the officer I met at the corner I hastened up the block to the rear entrance on the seventh street. There are three doors to the Fairbrother house, as you probably know, two on Eighty-sixth street the large front one and a small one connecting directly with the turret stairs and one on Eighty-seventh street. It was to the latter I had a key. I do not think any one saw me go in. It was raining, and such people as went by were more concerned in keeping their umbrellas properly over their heads than in watching men skulking about in doorways.

I got in, then, all right, and, being careful to close the door behind me, went up the first short flight of steps to what I knew must be the main hall. I had been given a plan of the interior, and I had studied it more or less before starting out, but I knew that I should not lose if I did not keep to the rear staircase at the top of which I expected to find the steward's room. There was a faint light in the house, in spite of its closed shutters and tightly drawn shades, and having a certain dread of using my torch, knowing my weakness for pretty things and how hard it would be for me to pass so many fine rooms without looking in, I made my way up stairs, with no other guide than the handrail. When I had reached what I took to be the third floor, I stopped. Finding it very dark, I first listened—a natural instinct with me—then I lit up and looked about me.

"I was in a large hall, empty as a vault and almost as desolate. Blank doors met my eyes in all directions, with here and there an open passageway. I felt myself in a maze. I had no idea which was the door I sought, and it is not pleasant to turn unaccounted knobs in a shut up house at midnight, with the rain pouring in torrents and the wind making pandemonium in the half dozen great chimneys.

"But it had to be done, and I went at it as regular order till I came to a little narrow one opening on the turret stairs. This gave me my bearings. Some room adjoined the staircase. There was no difficulty in spotting the rear floor now and, merely stopping to close the opening I had made to this little staircase, I crossed to this door and flung it open. I had been right in my calculations. It was the steward's room, and I made at once for the door."

"And you found?"

"Mostly locked drawers. But a key on my bench opened some of these and my knife the rest. Here are the specimens of his handwriting which I collected. I doubt if you will get much out of them. I saw nothing compromising in the whole room, but then I hadn't time to go through his trunks, and one of them looked very interesting—old as the hills and—"

"You hadn't time? Why hadn't you time? What happened to cut it short?"

"Well, sir, I'll tell you." The tone in which this was said roused me if I did not from the desk which had disappeared, and was casting a look about the room, which was as bare as my hand of everything like ornament—

—I might almost say comfort—when I had he stopped midway and would my first intimation of his presence be the touch of cold steel or the flinging round me of two murderous arms? I had met with no break in the smooth surface of the wall, so could not have reached the second story. When I should get there the question would be whether to leave the staircase and seek him in the mazes of its great rooms or to keep on down to the parlor floor and so to the street, whither he was possibly bound. I own that I was almost tempted to turn on my light and have done with it, but I remembered of how little use I should be to you lying in this well of a staircase to compose myself and go on as I had begun. Next instant my fingers slipped round the edge of an opening, and I knew that the moment of decision had come. Realizing that no one can move so softly that he will not give away his presence in some way, I paused for the sound which I knew must come, and when a click rose from the depths of the hall before me I plunged into that hall and thus into the house proper.

"Here it was not so dark, yet I could make out none of the objects I now and then ran against. I passed a mirror (I hardly know how I knew it to be such), and in that mirror I seemed to see the ghost of a ghost fit by and vanished. It was too much. I muttered a suppressed oath and plunged forward, when I struck against a closing door. It flew open again, and I rushed in, turning on my light in my extreme desperation, when, instead of hearing the sharp report of a pistol, as I expected, I saw a second door fall to before me, this time with a sound like the snap of a spring lock. Finding that this was so, and that all advance was barred that way, I wheeled hurriedly back toward the door by which I had entered the place, to find that that had fallen to simultaneously with the other, a single spring acting for both. I was trapped—a prisoner in the strangest sort of passageway or closet, and as a speedy look about presently assured me, a prisoner with very little hope of immediate escape, for the doors were not only immovable, without even locks to pick or panels to break in, but the place was bare of windows, and the only communication which it would be said to have with the outside world at all was a shaft rising from the ceiling almost to the top of the house. Whether this served as a ventilator or a means of lighting up the hole when both doors were shut, it was much too inaccessible to offer any apparent way of escape.

"Never was a man more thoroughly boxed in. As I realized how little chance there was of any outside interference, how my captor, even if he was seen leaving the house by the officer on duty, would be taken for myself and so allowed to escape, I own that I felt my position a hopeless one. But anger is a powerful stimulant, and I was mortally angry, not only with Sears, but with myself. So when I was done swearing I took another look around, and, finding that there was no getting through the walls, turned my attention wholly to the shaft, which would certainly lead me out of the place if I could only find means to mount it.

"And how do you think I managed to do this at last? A look at my bedraggled, lime covered clothes may give you some idea. I cut a passage for myself up those perpendicular walls as the boy did up the face of the natural bridge in Virginia. Do you remember that old story in the reader? It came to me like an inspiration as I stood looking up from below, and, though I knew that I should have to work most of the way in perfect darkness, I decided that a man's life was worth some risk and that I had rather fall and break my neck while doing something than to spend hours in maddening inactivity, only to face death at last from slow starvation.

"I had a knife, an exceedingly good knife, in my pocket, and for the first few steps I should have the light of my electric torch. The difficulty—that is, the first difficulty—was to reach the shaft from the floor where I stood. There was but one article of furniture in the room, and that was something between a table and a desk. No chairs, and the desk was not high enough to enable me to reach the mouth of the shaft. If I could turn it on end, there might be some hope. But this did not look feasible. However, I threw off my coat and went at it as if I was given superhuman power or whether the clumsy thing was not so heavy as it looked. I did finally succeed in turning it on its end close under the opening from which the shaft rose. The next thing was to get on its top. That seemed about as impossible as climbing the bare wall itself, but presently I bethought me of the drawers, and, though they were locked, I did succeed by the aid of my keys to get enough of them open to make for myself a very good pair of stairs.

"I could now see my way to the mouth of the shaft, but after that! Taking out my knife, I felt the edge. It was a good one. So was the point, but was it good enough to work holes in plaster? It depended somewhat upon the plaster. Had the masons in finishing that shaft any thought of the poor wretch who one day would have to pit his life against the hardness of the final covering? My first dig at it would tell. I own I trembled violently at the prospect of what that first test would mean to me and wondered if the perspiration which I felt starting at every pore was the result of the effort I had been engaged in or just plain fear.

"Inspector, I do not intend to have you live with me through the five or six hours which followed. I was enabled to pierce that plaster with my

knife and even to penetrate deep enough to afford a place for the tips of my fingers and afterward for the point of my toes, digging, prying, sweating, panting, listening, first for a sudden opening of the doors beneath, then for some shout or wicked interference from above as I worked my way up inch by inch, foot by foot, to what might not be safely after it was attained.

"Five hours—six. Then I struck something which proved to be a window, and when I realized this and knew that with but one more effort I should breathe freely again, I came as near falling as I had at any time before I began this terrible climb.

"Happily, I had some premonition of my danger and threw myself into a position which held me till the dizzy minutes passed. Then I went calmly on with my work, and in another half hour had reached the window, which, fortunately for me, not only opened inward, but was off the latch. It was with a sense of inexpressible relief that I clambered through this window and for a brief moment breathed in the pungent odor of cedar. But it could have been only for a moment. It was 2 o'clock in the afternoon before I found myself again in the outer air.

"I did not ask him what the first was I knew. It was the stiletto.

"Strange that no one has testified to that handwriting," I remarked.

He looked at me in surprise.

"Fifty persons have sent in samples of writing which they think like it," he observed; "often of persons who never heard of the Fairbrothers. We have been bothered greatly with the business. You know little of the difficulties the police labor under."

"I know too much," I sighed.

He smiled and patted me on the hand.

"Go back to your patient," he said. "Forget every other duty but that of your calling until you get some definite word from me. I shall not keep you in suspense one minute longer than is absolutely necessary."

He had risen. I rose too. But I was not satisfied. I could not leave the room with my ideas (I might say with my convictions) in such a turmoil.

"Inspector," said I, "you will think me very obstinate, but all you have told me about Sears, all I have heard about him, in fact—this I emphasized—does not convince me of the entire folly of my own suspicions. Indeed, I am afraid that, if anything, they are strengthened. This steward, who is a doubtful character, I acknowledge, may have had his reasons for wishing Mrs. Fairbrother's death, may even have had a hand in the matter, but what evidence have you to show that he, himself, entered the alcove, struck the blow or stole the diamond? I have listened eagerly for some such evidence, but I have listened in vain."



"I worked my way up inch by inch."

The only way I can account for the lapse of time is that the strain to which both body and nerve had been subjected was too much for even my hardy body and that I fell to the floor of the cedar closet and from a faint went into a sleep that lasted until 2. I can easily account for the last hour because it took me that long to cut the thick paneling from the door of the closet. However, I am here now, sir, and in very much the same condition in which I left that house. I thought my first duty was to tell you that I had seen Hiram Sears in that house last night and put you on his track."

I drew a long breath—I think the inspector did. I had been almost rigid from excitement, and I don't believe he was quite free from it either. But his voice was calmer than I expected, when he finally said:

"I'll remember this. It was a good night's work." Then the inspector put to him some questions, which seemed to fix the fact that Sears had left the house before Sweetwater did, after which he bade him send certain men to him and then go and fix himself up.

I believe he had forgotten me. I had almost forgotten myself.

(Continued Next Week.)

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His nose she don't remember. Both agree, or rather, all agree, that he wore no beard. Sears did, but a beard can be easily taken off—and all of them declare that they would know him instantly if they saw him. And so the matter stands. Even you can give me no definite description—one, I mean, as satisfactory or unsatisfactory as this of Sears."

I shook my head. Like the others, I felt that I should know him if I saw him, but I could go no further than that. There seemed to be so little that was distinctive about the man.

The inspector, hoping, perhaps, that all this would serve to rouse my memory, shrugged his shoulders and put the best face he could on the matter.

"Well, well," said he, "we shall have to be patient. A day may make all the difference possible in our outlook. If we can lay hands on either of these men—"

He seemed to realize he had said a word too much, for he instantly changed the subject by asking if I had succeeded in getting a sample of Miss Grey's writing. I was forced to say no; that everything had been carefully put away. "But I do not know what moment I may come upon it," I added. "I do not forget its importance in this investigation."

"Very good. These lines handed up to Mrs. Fairbrother from the walk outside are the second most valuable clue we possess."

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