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 XXI—(Continued.)

Sears knew what all this meant. He understood what was in his master's mind as well as if he had been taken into his full confidence, and openly accepted his part of the business with seeming alacrity, even to the point of supplying Fairbrother with suitable references as to the ability of one James Wellgood to fill a waiter's place at fashionable functions. It was not the first he had given him. Seventeen years before he had written the same, minus the last phrase. That was when he was the master and Fairbrother the man. But he did not mean to play the part laid out for him, for all his apparent acquiescence. He began by following the other's instructions. He exchanged clothes with him and other necessaries, and took the train for L— Junta at or near the time that Fairbrother started east. But once at L— Junta—once registered there as Abner Fairbrother from New York—he took a different course from the one laid out for him, a course which finally brought him into his master's wake and landed him at the same hour in New York.

This is what he did. Instead of shutting himself up in his room, he expressed an immediate desire to visit some neighboring mines, and, procuring a good horse, started off at the first available moment. He rode north, losing himself in the mountains, and wandered till he found a guide intelligent enough to lend himself to his plans. To this guide he confided his horse for the few days he intended to be gone, paying him well and promising him additional money if, during his absence, he succeeded in circulating the report that he, Abner Fairbrother, had gone deep into the mountains, bound for such and such a camp.

Having thus provided an alibi, not only for himself but for his master, too, in case he should need it, he took the direct road to the nearest railway station and started on his long ride east. He did not expect to overtake the man he had been personating, but fortune was kinder than is usual in such cases, and, owing to a delay caused by some accident to a freight train, he arrived in Chicago within a couple of hours of Mr. Fairbrother, and started out of that city on the same train. But not on the same car. Sears had caught a glimpse of Fairbrother on the platform and was careful to keep out of his sight. This was easy enough. He bought a compartment in the sleeper and stayed in it till they arrived at the Grand Central station. Then he hastened out and, fortune favoring him with another glimpse of the man in whose movements he was so interested, followed him into the streets.

Fairbrother had shaved off his beard before leaving El Moro. Sears had shaved his off on the train. Both were changed, the former the more owing to a peculiarity of his mouth which up till now he had always thought best to cover. Sears therefore walked behind him without fear and was almost at his heels when this owner of one of New York's most notable mansions entered with a spruce air the doors of a prominent caterer.

Understanding the plot now and having everything to fear for his mistress, he walked the streets for some hours in a state of great indecision. Then he went up to her apartment. But he had no sooner come within sight of it than a sense of disloyalty struck him, and he slunk away, only to come sidling back when it was too late and she had started for the ball.

Trembling with apprehension, but still strangely divided in his impulses, wishing to serve master and mistress both without disloyalty to the one or injury to the other, he hesitated and argued with himself till his fears for the latter drove him to Mr. Ramsdell's house.

The night was a stormy one. The heaviest snow of the season was falling, with a high gale blowing down the sound. As he approached the house, which, as we know, is one of the modern ones in the Riverside district, he felt his heart fail him. But as he came nearer and got the full effect of glancing lights, seductive music and the cheery bustle of crowding carriages he saw in his mind's eye such a picture of his beautiful mistress, threatened unknown to herself in a quarter she little realized, that he lost all sense of what had hitherto deterred him. Making then and there his great choice, he looked about for the entrance with the full intention of seeing and warning her.

But this, he presently perceived, was totally impracticable. He could neither go to her nor expect her to come to him. Meanwhile time was passing, and if his master was there— The thought made his head dizzy, and, sitting as he was among the carriages, he might have been run over in his confusion if his eyes had not suddenly fallen on a lighted window, the shade of which had been inadvertently left up.

Within this window, which was only a few feet above his head, stood the glowing image of a woman clad in pink and sparkling with jewels. Her face was turned from him, but he recognized her splendor as that of the one woman who could never be too gorgeous for his taste, and, alive to this unexpected opportunity, he made for this window with the intention of shouting up to her and so attracting her attention.

But this proved futile, and, driven at last to the end of his resources, he tore out a slip of paper from his notebook and in the dark and with the blinding snow in his eyes wrote the few broken sentences which he thought would best warn her without compromising his master. The means he took to reach her with this note I have already related. As soon as he saw it in her hands he fled the place and took the first train west. He was in a pitiable condition when, three days later, he reached the small station from which he had originally set out. The haste, the exposure, the horror of the crime he had failed to avert, had undermined his hitherto excellent constitution, and the symptoms of a serious illness were beginning to make themselves manifest. But he, like his indomitable master, possessed a great fund of energy and will power. He saw that if he was to save Abner Fairbrother (and now that Mrs. Fairbrother was dead his old master was all the world to him) he must make Fairbrother's alibi good by carrying on the deception as planned by the latter and getting as soon as possible to his camp in the New Mexico mountains. He knew that he would have strength to do this, and he went about it without sparing himself.

Making his way into the mountains, he found the guide and his horse at the place agreed upon and, paying the guide enough for his services to insure a quiet tongue, rode back toward El Moro, where he was met and sent on to Santa Fe as already related.

Such is the real explanation of the well nigh unintelligible scrawl found in Mrs. Fairbrother's hand after her death. As to the one which left Miss Grey's bedside for this same house, it was, alike in the writing and sending, the loving freak of a very sick but tender hearted girl. She had noted the look with which Mr. Grey had left her, and, in her delirious state, thought that a line in her own hand would convince him of her good condition and make it possible for him to enjoy the evening. She was, however, too much afraid of her nurse to write it openly, and though we never found that scrawl, it was doubtless not very different in appearance from the one with which I had confounded it. The man to whom it was intrusted stopped for too many warming drinks on his way for it ever to reach Mr. Ramsdell's house. He did not even return home that night, and when he did put in an appearance the next morning, he was dismissed.

This takes me back to the ball and Mrs. Fairbrother. She had never had much fear of her husband till she received his old servant's note in the peculiar manner already mentioned. This, coming through the night and the wet and with all the marks of hurry upon it, did impress her greatly and led her to take the first means which offered of ridding herself of her dangerous ornament. The story of this we know.

Meanwhile a burning heart and a scheming brain were keeping up their deadly work a few paces off under the impassive aspect and active movements of the caterer's newly hired waiter. Abner Fairbrother, whose real character no one had ever been able to sound, unless it was the man who had known him in his days of struggle was one of those dangerous men who can conceal under a still brow and a noiseless manner the most violent passions and the most desperate resolves. He was angry with his wife, who was deliberately jeopardizing his good name, and he had come there to kill her if he found her flaunting the diamond in Mr. Grey's eyes; and though no one could have detected any change in his look and manner as he passed through the room where these two were standing, the doom of that fair woman was struck when he saw the eager scrutiny and indescribable air of recognition with which this long defrauded gentleman eyed his own diamond.

He had meant to attack her openly, seize the diamond, fling it at Mr. Grey's feet and then kill himself. That had been his plan. But when he found after a round or two among the guests that nobody looked at him and nobody recognized the well known millionaire in the automaton-like figure with the formally arranged whiskers and sleekly combed hair, colder purposes intervened, and he asked himself if it would not be possible to come upon her alone, strike his blow, possess himself of the diamond and make for parts unknown before his identity could be discovered. He loved life even without the charm cast over it by this woman. Its struggles and its hard bought luxuries fascinated him. If Mr. Grey suspected him, why, Mr. Grey was English and he a resourceful American. If it came to an issue, the subtle American would win if Mr. Grey were not able to point to the flaw which marked this diamond as his own. And this Fairbrother had provided against and would succeed in if he could hold his passions in check and be ready with all his wit when matters reached a climax.

Such were the thoughts and such the plans of the quiet, attentive man who, with his tray laden with coffee and ices, came and went an unnoticed unit among the twenty other units similarly quiet and similarly attentive. He waited on lady after lady, and when, on the reissuing of Mr. Durand from the alcove, he passed in there with his tray and his two cups of coffee nobody heeded and nobody remembered.

It was all over in a minute, and he came out, still unnoted, and went to the supper room for more cups of coffee. But that minute had set its seal on his heart forever. She was sitting there alone, with her side to the entrance, so that he had to pass around in order to face her. Her elegance and a certain air she had of remoteness from the scene of which she was the glowing center when she smiled, awed him and made his hand loosen a little on the slender stiletto he held close against the bottom of the tray. But such resolution does not easily yield, and his fingers soon tightened again, this time with a deadly grip.

He had expected to meet the flash of the diamond as he bent over her and dreaded doing so for fear it would attract his eye from her face and so cost him the sight of that startled recognition which would give the desired point to his revenge. But the tray, as he held it, shielded her breast from view, and when he lowered it to strike his blow he thought of nothing but aiming so truly as to need no second blow. He had had his experience in those old years in a mining camp, and he did not fear failure in this. What he did fear was her utterance of some cry, possibly his name, but she was stunned with horror and did not shriek—horror of him whose eyes she met with her glassy and staring ones as he slowly drew forth the weapon.

Why he drew it forth instead of leaving it in her breast he could not say. Possibly because it gave him his moment of gloating revenge. When in another instant her hands flew up and the tray tipped and the china fell the revulsion came, and his eyes opened to two facts—the instrument of death was still in his grasp, and the diamond, on whose possession he counted, was gone from his wife's breast.

It was a horrible moment. Voices could be heard approaching the alcove—laughing voices that in an instant would take on the note of horror. And the music—ah, how low it had sunk, as if to give place to the dying murmur he now heard issuing from her lips! But he was a man of iron. Thrusting the stiletto into the first place that offered, he drew the curtains over the staring windows, then slid out with his tray, calm, speckless and attentive as ever, dead to thought, dead to feeling, but aware, quite aware in the secret depths of his being that something besides his wife had been killed that night and that sleep and peace of mind and all pleasure in the past were gone forever.

It was not he I saw enter the alcove and come out with news of the crime. He left this role to one whose antecedents could better bear investigation. His part was to play, with just the proper display of horror and curiosity, the ordinary menial brought face to face with a crime in high life. He could do this. He could even sustain his share in the gossip, and for this purpose kept near the other waiters. The absence of the diamond was all that troubled him. That brought him at times to the point of vertigo. Had Mr. Grey recognized and claimed it? If so, he, Abner Fairbrother, must remain James Wellgood, the waiter, indefinitely. This would require more belief in his star than ever he had had yet. But as the moments passed and no contradiction was given to the universally received impression that the same hand which had struck the blow had taken the diamond, even this cause of anxiety left his breast, and he faced people with more and more courage till the moment when he suddenly heard that the diamond had been found in the possession of a man perfectly strange to him and saw the inspector pass it over into the hands of Mr. Grey.

Instantly he realized that the crisis of his fate was on him. If Mr. Grey were given time to identify this stone, he (Abner Fairbrother) was lost and the diamond as well. Could he prevent this? There was but one way, and that way he took. Making use of his ventriloquial powers—he had spent a year on the public stage in those early days, playing just such tricks as these—he raised the one cry which he knew would startle Mr. Grey more than any other in the world, and when the diamond fell from his hand, as he knew it would, he rushed forward and, in the act of picking it up, made that exchange which not only baffled the suspicions of the statesman, but restored to him the diamond, for whose possession he was now ready to barter half his remaining days.

Meanwhile Mr. Grey had had his own anxieties. During this whole long evening, he had been sustained by the conviction that the diamond of which he had caught but one passing glimpse was the Great Mogul of his once famous collection. So sure was he of this, that at one moment he found himself tempted to enter the alcove, demand a closer sight of the diamond and settle the question then and there. He even went so far as to take in his hands the two cups of coffee which should serve as his excuse for this intrusion, but his naturally chivalrous instincts again intervened, and he set the cups down again—this I did not see—and turned his steps toward the library with the intention of writing her a note instead. But though he found paper and pen to hand, he could find no words for so daring a request, and he came back into the hall, only to hear that the woman he had contemplated addressing had just been murdered and her great jewel stolen.

The shock was too much, and as there was no leaving the house then, he retreated again to the library where he devoured his anxieties in silence till hope revived again at sight of the diamond in the inspector's hand, only to vanish under the machinations of one he did not even recognize when he took the false jewel from his hand.

The American had outwitted the Englishman and the triumph of evil was complete.

Or so it seemed. But if the Englishman is slow, he is sure. Thrown off the track for the time being, Mr. Grey had only to see a picture of the stiletto in the papers, to feel again that, despite all appearances, Fairbrother was really not only at the bottom of the thefts from which his cousin and himself had suffered, but of this frightful murder as well. He made no open move—he was a stranger in a strange land and much disturbed, besides, by his fears for his daughter—but he started a secret inquiry through his old valet, whom he ran across in the street and whose peculiar adaptability for this kind of work he well knew.

The aim of these inquiries was to determine if the person, whom two physicians and three assistants were endeavoring to nurse back to health on the top of a wild plateau in a remote district of New Mexico, was the man he had once entertained at his own board in England, and the adventures thus incurred would make a story in itself. But the result seemed to justify them. Word came after innumerable delays, very trying to Mr. Grey, that he was not the same, though he bore the name of Fairbrother, and was considered by every one around there to be Fairbrother. Mr. Grey, ignorant of the relations between the millionaire master and his man which sometimes led to the latter's personifying the former, was confident of his own mistake and bitterly ashamed of his own suspicions.

But a second message set him right. A deception was being practiced down in New Mexico, and this was how his spy had found it out. Certain letters which went into the sick tent were sent away again, and always to that one address. He had learned the address. It was that of James Wellgood, C—, Maine. If Mr. Grey would look up this Wellgood he would doubtless learn something of the man he was so interested in.

This gave Mr. Grey personally something to do, for he would trust no second party with a message involving the honor of a possibly innocent man. As the place was accessible by railroad and his duty clear, he took the journey involved and succeeded in getting a glimpse in the manner we know of the man James Wellgood. This time he recognized Fairbrother and, satisfied from the circumstances of the moment that he would be making no mistake in accusing him of having taken the Great Mogul, he intercepted him in his flight, as you have already read, and demanded the immediate return of his great diamond.

And Fairbrother? We shall have to go back a little to bring his history up to this critical instant.

When he realized the trend of public opinion, when he saw a perfectly innocent man committed to the Tombs for his crime, he was first astonished and then amused at what he continued to regard as the triumph of his star. But he did not start for El Moro, wise as he felt it would be to do so. Something of the fascination usual with criminals kept him near the scene of his crime, that and an anxiety to see how Sears would conduct himself in the southwest. That Sears had followed him to New York, knew his crime and was the strongest witness against him was as far from his thoughts as that he owed him the warning which had all but balked him of his revenge. When therefore he read in the papers that "Abner Fairbrother" had been found sick in his camp at Santa Fe he felt that nothing now stood in the way of his entering on the plans he had framed for ultimate escape. On his departure from El Moro he had taken the precaution of giving Sears the name of a certain small town on the coast of Maine where his mail was to be sent in case of a great emergency. He had chosen this town for two reasons—first, because he knew all about it, having had a young man from there in his employ; secondly, because of its neighborhood to the inlet where an old launch of his had been docked for the winter. Always astute, always precautionary, he had given orders to have this launch floated and provisioned, so that now he had only to send word to the captain to have at his command the best possible means of escape.

Meanwhile he must make good his position in C—. He did it in the way we know. Satisfied that the only danger he need fear was the discovery of the fraud practiced in New Mexico, he had confidence enough in Sears even in his present disabled state to take his time and make himself solid with the people of C— while waiting for the ice to disappear from the harbor. This accomplished and cruising made possible, he took a flying trip to New York to secure such papers and valuables as he wished to carry out of the country with him. They were in safe deposit, but that safe deposit was in his strong room in the center of his house in Eighty-sixth street—a room which you will remember in connection with Sweetwater's adventure.

To enter his own door with his own latchkey, in the security and darkness of a stormy night, seemed to this self confident man a matter of no great risk. Nor did he find it so. He reached his strong room, procured his securities and was leaving the house, without having suffered an alarm, when some instinct of self preservation suggested to him the advisability of arming himself with a pistol. His own had been left in Maine, but he remembered where Sears kept his. He had seen it often enough in that old trunk he had brought with him from the Sierras. He accordingly went upstairs to the steward's room, found the pistol and became from that instant invincible. But in restoring the articles he had pulled out he came across a photograph of his wife and lost himself over it and went mad, as we have heard the detective tell. That later, he should succeed in trapping this detective and should leave the house without a qualm as to his fate, shows what sort of man he was in moments of extreme danger. I doubt, from what I have heard of him since,

He came across a photograph of his wife.

if he ever gave two thoughts to the man after he had sprung the double lock on him; which, considering his extreme ignorance of who his victim was or what relation he bore to his own fate, was certainly remarkable.

Back again in C—, he made his final preparations for departure. He had already communicated with the captain of the launch, who may or may not have known his passenger's real name. He says that he supposed him to be some agent of Mr. Fairbrother's; that among the first orders he received from that gentleman was one to the effect that he was to follow the instructions of one Wellgood as if they came from himself; that he had done so, and not till he had Mr. Fairbrother on board had he known whom he was expected to carry into other waters. However, there are many who do not believe the captain. Fairbrother had a genius for rousing devotion in the men who worked for him, and probably this man was another Sears.

To leave speculation, all was in train, then, and freedom but a quarter of a mile away, when the boat he was in was stopped by another and he heard Mr. Grey's voice demanding the jewel.

The shock was severe and he had need of all the nerve which had hitherto made his career so prosperous to sustain the encounter with the calmness which alone could carry off the situation. Declaring that the diamond was in New York, he promised to restore it if the other would make the sacrifice worth while by continuing to preserve his hitherto admirable silence concerning him. Mr. Grey responded by granting him just twenty-four hours, and when Fairbrother said the time was not long enough and allowed his hand to steal ominously to his breast he repeated still more decisively, "Twenty-four hours."

The ex-miner honored bravery. Withdrawing his hand from his breast, he brought out a notebook instead of a pistol and, in a tone fully as determined, replied: "The diamond is in a place inaccessible to any one but myself. If you will put your name to a promise not to betray me for the thirty-six hours I ask, I will sign one to restore you the diamond before 1:30 o'clock on Friday."

"I will," said Mr. Grey.

So the promises were written and duly exchanged. Mr. Grey returned to New York, and Fairbrother boarded his launch.

The diamond really was in New York, and to him it seemed more politic to use it as a means of securing Mr. Grey's permanent silence than to fly the country, leaving a man behind him who knew his secret and could precipitate his doom with a word. He would therefore go to New York, play his last great card and, if he lost, be no worse off than he was now. He did not mean to lose.

But he had not calculated on any inherent weakness in himself—had not calculated on Providence. A dish tumbled and with it fell into chaos the fair structure of his dreams. With the cry of "Grizell! Grizell!" he gave up his secret, his hopes and his life. There was no retrieval possible after that. The star of Abner Fairbrother had set.

Mr. Grey and his daughter learned very soon of my relations to Mr. Durand, but through the precautions of the inspector and my own powers of self control no suspicion has ever crossed their minds of the part I once played in the matter of the stiletto.

This was amply proved by the invitation Mr. Durand and I have just received to spend our honeymoon at Darlington Manor.

THE END.

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