

The Woman In the Alcove

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN.

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

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

"Not Mr. Durand," I maintained stoutly. "Perhaps that is his name?" Then, with a quick change of manner, he bent toward me, with a sidelong look in his eyes and pointing to my gloves, remarked, "You wear gloves. Did you feel the need of two pairs that you carry another in that pretty bag hanging from your arm?"

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

"And is not mine," I began, faltering into silence as I perceived my uncle turn and walk a step or two away.

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

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

"Let me have them," he said. With quaking heart and shaking fingers I handed over the gloves. "Mrs. Fairbrother's hand was not a small one," he observed as he slowly unrolled them. "Yours is. We can see that."

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

uttered a sudden, sharp ejaculation.

"He uttered a sudden, sharp ejaculation," I repeated, "and a smothered shriek. An object of superlative brilliancy had rolled over from them—the diamond, the gem which men said was worth a king's ransom and which we all knew had just cost a life!"

"From the moment I learned of this woman's murder in the alcove, where I had visited her, I realized that every one who had been seen to approach her within a half hour of her death would be subjected to a more or less rigid investigation, and I feared if her gloves were found in my possession some special attention might be directed my way which would cause me unmerited distress. So, yielding to an impulse which I now recognize as a most unwise as well as unworthy one, I took advantage of the bustle about us and of the insensibility into which she had fallen to tuck these miserable gloves into the bag I was lying on the floor at your side. I do not ask your pardon. My whole future life shall be devoted to winning that. I simply wish to state a fact."

"Very good!" It was the inspector who spoke. I could not have uttered a word to save my life. "Perhaps you will now tell me that you owe it to this young lady to add how you came to have these gloves in your possession."

"Mrs. Fairbrother handed them to me."

"Handed them to you?"

"Yes, I hardly know why myself. She asked me to take care of them for her. I know that this must strike you as a very peculiar statement. It was my realization of the unfavorable effect it could not fail to produce upon those who heard it which made me dread any interrogation on the subject. But I assure you it was as I say. She put the gloves into my hand while I was talking to her, saying they 'incriminated her.'"

"And you?"

"Well, I held them for a few minutes. Then I put them in my pocket, but quite automatically and without thinking very much about it. It was a woman accustomed to have her own way. People seldom questioned her. I judge."

"Here the tension about my throat relaxed, and I opened my lips to speak. But the inspector, with a glance of some authority, forestalled me.

"Were the gloves open or rolled up when she handed them to you?"

"They were rolled up."

"Did you see her last hour?"

"Assuredly."

"And call them up?"

"Certainly."

"After which she passed them over to you?"

"Not immediately. She let them lie in her lap for awhile."

Spector moved forward to comply, he threw his arm about me, and was endeavoring to find fitting words with which to fill up the delay, when a short altercation was heard from the doorway, and Mr. Durand came rushing in, followed immediately by the inspector.

His first look was not at myself, but at the bag, which still hung from my arm. As I noted this action, my whole inner self seemed to collapse, dragging my happiness down with it. But my countenance remained unchanged, too much so, it seems; for when his eye finally rose to my face, he found there what made him recoil and turn with something like fierceness on his companion.

"You have been talking to her," he vehemently protested. "Perhaps you have gone further than that. What has happened here? I think I ought to know. She is so glib, Inspector Dutzell; so perfectly free from all connection with this crime. Why have you shut her up here, and piled her with questions, and made her look at me with such an expression, when all you have against me is just what you have against some half dozen others—that I was weak enough, or unfortunate enough, to spend a few minutes with that infernal woman in the alcove before the deed?"

"It might be well if Mrs. Van Arsdale herself would answer you," said the inspector's under officer. "What you have said may excite all that we have against you, but it is not all we have against her."

I gasped, not so much at this seeming accusation, the motive of which I believed myself to understand, but at the burning blush with which it was greeted by Mr. Durand.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, with certain odd breaks in his voice. "What can you have against her?"

"A triviale," returned the inspector, with a look in my direction that was, I felt, not to be mistaken.

"I do not call it a triviale," I burst out. "It seems that Mrs. Fairbrother, for all her elaborate toilet, was found without gloves on her arms. As she certainly wore them on entering the alcove, the police have naturally been looking for them. And where do you think they have found them? Not in the alcove with her, but in the possession of the man who undoubtedly carried them away with him, but—"

"I know, I know," Mr. Durand hoarsely put in. "You need not say any more. Oh, my poor Rita! What have I brought upon you by my weakness?"

"Weakness?"

"He started, I started. My voice was totally unrecognizable. "I should give it another name," I added coolly.

For a moment he seemed to lose heart, then he lifted his head again and looked as handsome as when he pleaded for my hand in the little conservatory.

"You have that right," said he. "Besides, weakness of such a time and under such an emergency is little short of wrong. It was unmanly in me to endeavor to secure these gloves, more than anything else, for the sake of their hiding place, the recesses of an article belonging exclusively to yourself. I acknowledge it, Rita, and shall meet only my just punishment if you deny me in the future both your sympathy and regard. But you must let me assure you and these gentlemen also, one of whom can make it very unpleasant for me, that consideration for you, much more than any miserable anxiety about myself, lay at the bottom of what must strike you all as an act of unpardonable cowardice."

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"While you talked?"

"Mr. Durand bowed, and the inspector followed immediately by the inspector."

"Had you ever seen so fine a diamond before?"

"No."

"Yet you deal in precious stones?"

"That is my business."

"And are regarded as a judge of them?"

"I have that reputation."

"Mr. Durand, would you know this diamond if you saw it?"

"I certainly should."

"The setting was an uncommon one, I hear."

"Quite an unusual one."

The inspector opened his hand. "Is this the article?"

"Good God! Where?"

"Don't you know?"

"I do not."

The inspector eyed him gravely. "Then I have a bit of news for you. It was hidden in the gloves you took from Mrs. Fairbrother. Miss Van Arsdale was present at their meeting."

"Do we live, move, breathe at certain moments?" It hardly seems so, I know that I was suspicious of but was sure, that of seeing and of last one faculty, that of judgment. Would he think, break down, betray guilt, or simply show astonishment? I chose to believe it was the latter feeling only which informed his slowly whitening and discolored features. Certainly it was all his words expressed, as his glances flew from the stone to the gloves and back again to the inspector's face.

"I cannot believe it. I cannot believe it. And his hand flew wildly to his forehead."

"Yet it is the truth, Mr. Durand, and one you have now to face. How will you do this? By any further explanations, or by what you may consider a discreet silence?"

"I have nothing to explain—the facts are as I have stated."

The inspector regarded him with an earnestness which made my heart sink. "You can fix the time of this visit, I hope; tell us, I mean, just when you left the alcove. You must have seen some one who can speak for you."

"I fear not."

"Why did he look so disturbed and uncertain?"

"There were but few persons in the hall just then," he went on to explain. "No one was sitting on the yellow divan."

"You know where you went, though? Whom you saw and what you did before the alarm spread?"

"Inspector, I am quite confused. I did go somewhere; I did not remain in that part of the hall. But I can tell you nothing definite, save that I walked about, mostly among strangers, till the cry rose which sent us all in the direction and me to the side of my falling sweetheart."

"Can you pick out any stranger you talked to, or any one who might have noticed you during this interval? You see, for the sake of this little woman, I wish to give you every chance."

"Inspector, I am obliged to throw myself on your mercy. I have no such witness to my innocence as you call for. Innocent people seldom have. It is only the guilty who take the trouble to provide for such contingencies."

The opportunity of saying before I replied with all the passion of a former hope that it was only at this present moment I remembered a fact which might have a very decided bearing on this case; and, detecting evidences, as I thought, of relenting on his part, I backed up this statement by an entreaty for a few words with him apart, as the matter I had to tell was private and possibly too fanciful for any ear but his own.

He looked as if he apprehended some loss of valuable time, but, touched by the involuntary gesture of appeal with which I supplemented my request, he led me into a corner, where, with just an encouraging glance toward Mr. Durand, who seemed struck dumb by my action, I told the inspector of that momentary picture which I had seen reflected in what I was now sure was some window pane or mirror.

"It was at a time coincident, or very nearly coincident, with the perpetration of the crime you are now investigating," I concluded. "Within five minutes afterward, came the shout which roused us all to what had happened in the alcove. I do not know what passage I saw or what door or even what mirror, but the latter, I am sure, was that of the guilty man. Something of the outline and it was the outline only I could catch expressed an emotion incomprehensible to me at the moment, but which in my remembrance impresses me as that of fear and dread. It was not the entrance to the alcove I believed—that would have struck me at once—but some other opening which I might recognize if I saw it. Cannot that opening be found, and may it not give a clue to the man I saw standing through it with terror and remorse in his heart?"

"Was this figure when you saw it turned toward you or away?" the inspector inquired, with unexpected interest.

"Turned partly away. He was going from me."

"And you sat where?"

"I shall show you."

The inspector bowed, then with a low word of caution turned to my uncle.

"I am going to take this young lady into the hall for a moment at her own request. May I ask you and Mr. Durand to await me here?"

Without pausing for reply, he threw open the door, and presently we were pacing the deserted supper room seeking the place where I had sat. I found it almost by a miracle, everything being in great disorder. Guided by my bouquet, which I had left behind me in my escape from the table, I lay hold of the chair before which it had stood and declared quite coincidentally to the inspector:

"This is where I sat."

Naturally his glance and mine both flew to the opposite wall. A window was before us of an unusual size and make. Unlike any which had ever before come under my observation, it swung on a pivot and, though shut at the present moment, might very easily when opened present its huge pane at an angle capable of casting reflections from some of the many mirrors decorating the reception room situated diagonally across the hall. As all the doorways on this lower floor were of unusual width, an open path was offered, as it were, for these reflections to pass, making it possible for scenes to be imagined here which to the persons involved would seem as safe from any one's scrutiny as if they were taking place in the adjoining house.

As we realized this a look passed between us of more than ordinary significance. Pointing to the window, the inspector turned to a group of waiters watching us from the other side of the room and asked if it had been opened that evening.

"The answer came quickly. "Yes, sir—just before this—the—"

"I understand," broke in the inspector, and, leaning over me, he whispered, "Tell me again exactly what you thought you saw."

But I could add little to my former description.

"Could you tell me this," he kindly persisted, "was the picture, which you saw it, on a level with your eyes as they have to lift your head in order to see it?"

"It was high up in the air, as it were. That seemed its salient feature."

The inspector's mouth took a satisfied curve.

"Could you identify the door and passage if I saw them," I suggested.

"Certainly, certainly," was the cheerful rejoinder, and, summoning one of his men, he was about to give some order when his luncheon changed, and he asked if I could draw.

I assured him, in some surprise, that I was far from being an adept in that direction, but that possibly I might manage a rough sketch, whereupon he pulled a pad and pencil from his pocket and requested me to make some sort of attempt to reproduce on paper my memory of this passage and the door.

My heart was beating violently, and the pencil shook in my hand, but I knew that it would not do for me to show any hesitation in fixing for all eyes what, unconsciously to myself, continued to be perfectly plain to my own. So I endeavored to do as he bade me and succeeded to some extent, for he uttered a slight ejaculation at one of its features and, while dutifully expressing his thanks, honored me with a very sharp look.

"Is this your first visit to this house?" he asked.

"No. I have been here before."

"In the evening or in the afternoon?"

"In the afternoon."

"I am told that the main entrance is not in use tonight."

"No. A side door is provided for occasions like the present. Guests entering there find a special hall and stair-

case, by which they can reach the upstairs dressing rooms without crossing the main hall. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, that is what I mean."

I started and felt in wonder. What lay back of such questions as these?

"You came in, as others did, by this side entrance," he now proceeded. "Did you notice, as you turned to go upstairs, an arch opening into a small passageway at your left?"

"I did not," I began, flushing, for I thought I understood him now. "I was too eager to reach the dressing room to look about me."

"Very well," he replied; "I may want to show you that arch."

The outline of an arch, backing the figure we were endeavoring to identify, was a marked feature in the sketch I had shown him.

"Will you take a seat nearby while I make a study of this matter?"

I thrust with alacrity to obey. There was something in his air and manner which made me almost buoyant. Had my fond interpretation of what I had seen reached him with the complete truth? If so, there was something in the man I loved, who had been for so long between curtains, and who probably analyzed such as he had questioned or I had described, that I was working for me. I knew it in the way the man now moved about, watching the window to my right, under the direction of the inspector, manipulating the lights, opening doors and drawing back curtains. Providence was working for me, and when a few minutes later, I was asked to retrace myself in my old place at the supper table and take another look in that slightly deflected glass I

Into the tolls in which he had become enmeshed.

The inspector left me no time for the settlement of this question. Usherlyg me back into the room where Mr. Durand and my uncle awaited our return in apparently unrelieved silence, he closed the door upon the curious eyes of the various persons still lingering in the hall and abruptly said to Mr. Durand:

"The explanations you have been pleased to give of the manner in which this diamond came into your possession are not too fanciful for evidence, if you can satisfy us on another point which has awakened some doubt in the mind of one of my men. Mr. Durand, you appear to have prepared yourself for departure somewhat prematurely. Do you mind removing that handkerchief for a moment? My reason for so peculiar a request will presently appear."

Alas, for my last fond hope! Mr. Durand, with a face as white as the background of snow framed by the uncurtained window against which he leaned, lifted his hand as if to comply with the inspector's request, then let it fall again with a grating clank.

"I see that I am not likely to escape any of the results of my imprudence," he cried, and with a quick jerk bare I his shirt front.

A splash of red defied its otherwise uniform whiteness! That it was the result of heart's blood was proved by the shrinking look he unconsciously cast at it.

CHAPTER IV.

MY love for Anson Durand died at sight of that crimson splash—or I thought it did. In this spot of blood on the breast of him to whom I had given my heart I could read but one word—guilt—helpless guilt, guilt denied and now brought to light in language that could be seen and read by all men. Why should I stay in such a presence? Had not the inspector himself advised me to go?

Yes, but another voice bade me remain. Just as I reached the door Anson Durand found his voice, and I heard, in the full, sweet tones I loved so well:

"Wait! I am not to be judged like this. I will explain."

But here the inspector interposed. "Do you think it wise to make any such attempt without the advice of counsel, Mr. Durand?"

The indignation with which Mr. Durand wheeled toward him raised in me a faint hope.

(Continued Next Friday.)

BIDS FOR WOOD

The board of education of School District No. 4, Eugene, will receive bids up to the 20th day of February, 1908, at the office of the clerk, Mr. Frank Reiser, for the delivery of the various school buildings in Eugene of 100 cords of oak wood and 100 cords of fir wood, said delivery to be completed on or before September 1, 1908.

The board reserves the right to reject any and all bids and a bond for the faithful performance of the contract will be required of the successful bidder, if any there be. Dated February 5th, 1908. FRANK REISNER, Clerk.

DRESS CARNIVAL

Masquerade at roller rink. Prizes awarded.

WE CAN SUPPLY Your wants with wood—Oak, Maple, Fir, and Ties. Also Coal. WILLIAMS TRANSFER CO. Phone Black 1141.

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He uttered a sudden, sharp ejaculation.



With a quick jerk he bared his shirt front.