

SIGHT UNSEEN

by MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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FOURTH INSTALLMENT

SYNOPSIS

The people around Johnson (who tells the story), his wife, Mrs. Dene, Herbert Robinson and his wife, Alice, and Dr. Sperry, friends and neighbors, are in the habit of holding weekly meetings. At one of these, Mrs. Dene, who is hostess, varies the program by unexpectedly arranging a spiritualistic seance with Miss Jeremy, a friend of Dr. Sperry and not a professional, as the medium.

At the first sitting the medium tells the details of a murder as it is occurring. Later that night Sperry learns that a neighbor, Arthur Wells, has been shot mysteriously. With Johnson he goes to the Wells residence and they find confirmation of the medium's account. Mrs. Wells tells them her husband shot himself in a fit of depression.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

Believing then that something might possibly be hidden there, I made an investigation, and could see some small objects lying there. Sperry brought me a stick from the dressing-room, and with its aid succeeded in bringing out the two articles which were instrumental in starting us on our brief and adventurous careers as private investigators. One was a leather razor strap, old and stiff from disuse, and the other a wet bath sponge, now stained with blood to a yellowish brown.

"She is lying, Sperry," I said. "He fell somewhere else, and she dragged him to where he was found."

"But—why?"

"I don't know," I said impatiently. "From some place where a man would be unlikely to kill himself, I daresay. No one ever killed himself, for instance, in an open hallway. Or stopped shaving to do it."

"We have only Miss Jeremy's word for that," he said, sullenly. "Confound it, Horace, don't let's bring in that stuff if we can help it."

We stared at each other, with the group and the sponge between us. Suddenly he turned on his heel and went back into the room, and a moment later he called me, quietly.

"You're right," he said. "The poor devil was shaving. He had it half done. Come and look."

"I did not go. There was a cascade of water in the bathroom, and I took a drink from it. My hands were shaking. When I turned around I found Sperry in the hall, examining the carpet with his flash light, and now and then stooping to run his hand over the floor.

"Nothing here," he said in a low tone, when I had joined him. "At least I haven't found anything."

How much of Sperry's proceeding with the carpet the governess had seen I do not know. I glanced up and she was there, on the staircase to the third floor, watching us.

She came down the stairs, a lean young Frenchwoman in a dark dressing gown, and Sperry suggested that she should have an opiate. She seized at the idea, but Sperry did not go down at once for his professional bag.

"You were not here when it occurred, Mademoiselle?" he inquired.

"No, doctor. I had been out for a walk. She clasped her hands. "When I came back—"

"Was he still on the floor of the dressing-room when you came in?"

"But yes. Of course. She was alone. She could not lift him."

"I see," Sperry said thoughtfully. "No, I daresay she couldn't. Was the revolver on the floor also?"

"Yes, doctor. I myself picked it up."

To Sperry she showed, I observed, a slight deference, but when she glanced at me, as she did after each reply, I thought her expression slightly altered. At the time this puzzled me, but it was explained when Sperry started down the stairs.

"Monsieur is of the police?" she asked, with a Frenchwoman's timid respect for the constabulary.

I hesitated before I answered. I am a truthful man, and I hate unnecessary lying. But I ask consideration of the circumstances.

"I am making a few investigations," I told her. "You say Mrs. Wells was alone in the house, except for her husband?"

"The children."

"Mr. Wells was shaving, I believe, when the — er — impulse overtook him?"

There was no doubt as to her surprise. "Shaving? I think not."

"What sort of razor did he ordinarily use?"

"A safety razor always. At least I have never seen any others around."

"There is a case of old-fashioned razors in the bathroom."

She glanced toward the room and shrugged her shoulders. "Possibly he used others. I have not seen any."

"It was you, I suppose, who cleaned up afterwards?"

"Cleaned up?"

"You who washed up the stains?"

"Stains? Oh, no, monsieur. Nothing of the sort has yet been done."

"I felt that she was telling the truth, so far as she knew it, and I then asked about the revolver."

"Do you know where Mr. Wells kept his revolver?"

"Do you recall how you left the front door when you went out? I mean, was it locked?"

"No. The servants were out, and I knew there would be no one to admit me. I left it unfastened."

But it was evident that she had broken a rule of the house by doing so, for she added: "I am afraid to use the servants' entrance. It is dark there."

"The key is always hung on the nail when they are out?"

"Yes. If any one of them is out it is left there. There is only one key. The family is out a great deal, and it saves bringing some one down from the servants' rooms at the top of the



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house.

But I think my knowledge of the key bothered her, for some reason. And as I read over my questions, certainly they indicated a suspicion that the situation was less simple than it appeared. She shot a quick glance at me.

"Did you examine the revolver when you picked it up?"

"I, monsieur? Now!" Then her fears, whatever they were, got the best of her. "I know nothing but what I tell you. I was out. I can prove that that is so. I went to a pharmacy; the clerk will remember."

"So Elinor claims. But if there was anything to hide, it would have taken time. An hour or so, perhaps. You can see how Herbert would jump on that."

I said irritably to him. "I intend to go home, it is 1:30 in the morning."

But as it happened, I did not go into my house when I reached it. I was wide awake, and I perceived, on looking up at my wife's windows, that the lights were out. As it is her custom to wait up for me on those rare occasions when I spend an evening away from home, I surmised that she was comfortably asleep, and made my way to the pharmacy to which the Wells' governess had referred.

The night-clerk was in the prescription-room behind the shop. He had fixed himself comfortably on two chairs, with an old table-cover over his knee and a half-empty bottle of sarsaparilla on a wooden box beside him. He did not waken until I spoke to him.

"Sorry to rouse you, Jim," I said. He flung off the cover and jumped up, upsetting the bottle, which trickled a stale stream to the floor. "Oh, that's all right, Mr. Johnson, I wasn't asleep, anyhow."

I let that go, and went at once to the object of our visit. Yes, he remembered the governess, knew her, as a matter of fact. The Wells' bought a good many things there. Asked as to her telephoning, he thought it was about nine o'clock, maybe earlier. But questioned as to what she had telephoned about, he drew himself up.

"Oh, see here," he said. "I can't very well tell you that, can I? This business has got ethics, all sorts of ethics."

He enlarged on that. The secrets of the city, he maintained loftily, were in the hands of the pharmacies. It was a trust that they kept. "Every trouble from dope to drink, and then some," he boasted.

When I told him that Arthur Wells was dead his jaw dropped, but there was no more argument in him. He knew very well the number the governess had called.

"She's done it several times," he said. "I'll be frank with you. I got curious after the third evening, and called it myself. You know the trick. I found out it was the Ellingham house, up State Street."

"What was the nature of the conversations?"

"Oh, she was very careful. It's an open phone and any one could hear her. Once she said somebody was not to come. Another time she just said, 'This is Suzanne Gautier. 9:30, please.'"

"And tonight?"

"That the family was going out—not to call."

was when we were going out, and after Hawkins had opened the front door for us. It had been freezing hard, and Sperry, who has a bad ankle, looked about for a walking stick. He found one, and I saw Hawkins take a swift step forward, and then stop, with no expression whatever in his face.

"This will answer, Hawkins."

"Yes, sir," said Hawkins impassively.

And if I realize that Sperry was nervous that night, I also realize that he was fighting a battle quite his own, and with its personal problems.

"She's got to quit this sort of thing," he said savagely—and apropos

I know, monsieur, he will tell you that I used the telephone there."

I told her that it would not be necessary for her to go to the pharmacy, and she muttered something about the children and went up the stairs. When Sperry came back with the opiate she was nowhere in sight, and he was considerably annoyed.

"She knows something," I told him. "She is frightened."

Sperry eyed me with a half frown. "Now see here, Horace," he said. "suppose we had come in here, without the thought of that seance behind us? We'd have accepted the thing as it appears to be, wouldn't we? There may be a dozen explanations for that sponge, and for the razor strap. What in heaven's name has a razor strap to do with it anyhow? One bullet was fired, and the revolver has one empty chamber. It may not be the custom to stop shaving in order to commit suicide, but that's no argument that it can't be done, and as to the key—how do I know that my own back door key isn't hung outside on a nail sometimes?"

"We might look again for that hole in the ceiling."

"I won't do it. Miss Jeremy has read of something of that sort, or heard of it, and stored it in her subconscious mind."

But he glanced up at the ceiling nevertheless, and a moment later had drawn up a chair and stepped onto it, and I did the same thing. We presented, I imagine, rather a strange picture, and I know that the presence of the rigid figure on the couch gave me a sort of ghoulish feeling.

The house was an old one, and in the center of the high ceiling a plaster ornament surrounded the chandelier. Our search gradually centered on this ornament, but the chairs were low and our long-distance examination revealed nothing. It was at that time, too, that we heard some one in the lower hall, and we had only a moment to put our chairs in place before the butler came in. He showed no surprise, but stood looking at the body on the couch, his thin face working.

"I met the detectives outside, doctor," he said. "It's a terrible thing, sir, a terrible thing."

"I'd keep the other servants out of this room, Hawkins."

"Yes, sir." He went over to the sheet, lifted the edge slowly, and then replaced it, and tip-toed to the door.

"The others are not back yet. I'll admit them, and get them up quietly. How is Mrs. Wells?"

"Sleeping," Sperry said briefly, and Hawkins went out.

I realize now that Sperry was—I am sure he will forgive this—in a state of nerves that night. For example, he returned only an impatient silence to my doubt as to whether Hawkins had really only just returned and he quite missed something downstairs which I later proved to have an important bearing on the case. This

of medicine, as we walked along. "It's hard on her, and besides—"

"Yes?"

"She couldn't have learned about it," he said, following his own trail of thought. "My car brought her from her home to the house-door. She was brought in to us at once. But don't you see that if there are other developments, to prove her statements she—well, she's as innocent as a child, but take Herbert, for instance. Do you suppose he'll believe she had no outside information?"

"But it was happening while we were shut in the drawing-room."

"So Elinor claims. But if there was anything to hide, it would have taken time. An hour or so, perhaps. You can see how Herbert would jump on that."

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