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The Woman In the Alcove.

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN.
Author of "The Hillside Baby," "The Filigree Ball," "The House in the Mist," "The Amethyst Box," Etc.

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Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

Chapter I.—Among the guests at a society ball in New York are Miss Rita Van Arsdale, who has studied nursing and who tells the story; her lover, Anson Durand; Mrs. Fairbrother, who wears a magnificent diamond and a distinguished Englishman, Durand, who is a dealer in gems, is interested in the diamond. Rita sees the vision of a man reflected in a snapper-room window. Mrs. Fairbrother is found stabbed to death in an alcove. The diamond is missing.

Chapter II.—The diamond is found in a pair of Mrs. Fairbrother's gloves placed in Rita's hand-bag by Durand.

CHAPTER III.

WITH benumbed senses and a dismayed heart, I stared at the fallen jewel as at some hateful thing menacing both my life and honor.

"I have had nothing to do with it," I vehemently declared. "I did not put the gloves in my bag, nor did I know the diamond was in them. I fainted at the first alarm and—"

"There, there, I know," interposed the inspector kindly. "I do not doubt you in the least; not when there is a man to doubt. Miss Van Arsdale, you had better let your uncle take you home. I will see that the hall is cleared for you. Tomorrow I may wish to talk to you again, but I will spare you all further importunity tonight."

I shook my head. It would require more courage to leave at that moment than to stay. Meeting the inspector's eye firmly, I quietly declared:

"If Mr. Durand's good name is to suffer in any way, I will not forsake him. I have confidence in his integrity. If you have not, it was not his hand, but one much more guilty, which dropped this jewel into the bag."

"So, so! Do not be too sure of that, little woman. You had better take your lesson at once. I will be easier for you, and more wholesome for him," Here he plucked up the jewel.

"Well, they said it was a wonder!" he exclaimed, in his sudden admiration. "I am not surprised, now that I have seen a great gem at the famous stores. I have read of men risking life and honor for their possession. If only no blood had been shed!"

"Uncle, uncle! I wailed aloud in my agony.

It was all my lips could utter, but to uncle it was enough. Speaking for the first time, he asked for a passage made for us, and when the inspector 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 ruthless, Inspector Dalzell; 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 unhappy woman in the alcove before she died?"

"It might be well if Miss Van Arsdale herself would answer you, was the inspector's quiet retort. "What you have said may constitute all that we have against her, 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 which it was received by Mr. Durand.

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

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

"I do not call it a triviality," 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?"

"Heaven! I started. My voice was totally unrecognizable.

"I should give it another name," I added coldly.

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 at such a time and under such an exigency is little short of wrong. It was unmanly in me to endeavor to secrete these gloves, more than unmanly for me to choose for 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."

"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 you 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 you had fallen to tuck these miserable gloves into the bag I saw 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 feel 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 fall 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 belonged to 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. She was a woman accustomed to have her own way. People seldom questioned it, 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 offered them to you?"

"They were rolled up."

"Did you see her take them off?"

"Assuredly." "Perhaps you don't recall the roll them up?"

"Certainly."

"After which she passed them over to you?"

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

"While you talked?"

Mr. Durand bowed.

"And looked at the diamond?"

Mr. Durand bowed for the second time.

"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?"

"I do not know."

The inspector eyed him gravely.

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 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 sick.

"You can fix the time of this visit, I hope; tell me, 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 one direction and me to the side of my fainting sweetheart."

"Can you pick out any stranger you talked to, or any one who might have noted 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."

This was all very well, if it had been uttered with a straightforward air and in a clear tone. But it was not. I who loved him felt that it was not, and consequently was more or less prepared for the change which now took place in the inspector's manner.

Yet it pierced me to the heart to observe this change, and I instinctively dropped my face into my hands when I saw him move toward Mr. Durand with some final order or word of caution.

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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 snapper 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 laid hold of the chair before which it lay and declared quite confidently 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 have been opened to reveal a scene at an angle capable of catching 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 imaged 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 the—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.

"Perhaps you can tell me this," he kindly persisted. "Was the picture, when you saw it, on a level with your eyes or did you have to lift your head in order to see it?"

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

The inspector's mouth took a satisfied curve.

"Possibly I might identify the door and passage if I saw them," I suggested.

"Certainly, certainly," was his cheerful rejoinder, and, summoning one of his men, he was about to give some order when his impulse 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, unaccountably 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 duly expressing his thanks, honored me with a very sharp look.

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