The Woman in the Alcove---By Anna Katharine Green

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CHAPTER VI.—(Continued.)

"BECAUSE of the fraud he meditated. Because it offered him an opportunity for substituting a false stone for the real. Did you not notice a change in the aspect of this jewel dating from this very moment? Did it shine with as much brilliancy in your hand when you received it back as when you passed it over?"

"Nonsense! I do not know; it is all too absurd for argument." Yet, he did stop to argue, saying, in the next breath, "you forget that the stone has a setting. Would you claim that this gentleman of family, place and political distinction, had planned this hideous crime with sufficient premeditation to have provided himself with the exact counterpart of a brooch, which it is highly improbably he ever saw? You would make him out a Cagilostro or something worse. Miss Van Arsdale, I fear your theory will topple over of its own weight."

He was very patient with me, he did not show me the door.

"Yet such a substitution took place, and took place that evening," I insisted. "The bit of paste shown us at the inquest was never the gem she wore on entering the alcove. Besides, where all is sensation, why cavil at one more improbability? Mr. Grey may have come to America for no other reason. He is known as a collector, and when a man has a passion for diamond-getting—"

"He is known as a collector?"

"In his own country."

"I was not told that."

"Nor I. But I found it out."

"How, my dear child, how?"

"By a cablegram or so."

"You,—cabled,—his name,—to England?"

"No, inspector; uncle has a code, and I made use of it, to ask a friend in London for a list of the most noted diamond fanciers in the country. Mr. Grey's name was third on the list."

He gave me a look in which admiration was strangely blended with doubt and apprehension.

"You are making a brave struggle," said he, "but it is a hopeless one."

"I have one more confidence to repose in you. The nurse who has charge of Miss Grey was in my class in the hospital. We love each other, and to her I dared appeal on one point. Inspector—" Here my voice unconsciously fell as he unconsciously drew nearer—"a note was sent from that sick chamber on the night of the ball,—a note surreptitiously written by Miss Grey, while the nurse was in an adjoining room. The messenger was Mr. Grey's valet, and its destination the house in which her father was enjoying his position as chief guest. She says that it was meant for him, but I have dared to think that the valet would tell a different story. My friend did not see what her patient wrote, but she acknowledged that if her patient wrote more than two words, the result must have been an unintelligible scrawl, since she was too weak to hold a pencil firmly, and so nearly blind that she would have had to feel her way over the paper."

The inspector started, and, rising hastily, went to his desk, from which he presently brought the scrap of paper which had already figured in the inquest as the mysterious communication taken from Mrs. Fairbrother's hand by the coroner. Pressing it out flat, he took another look at it, then glanced up in visible discomposure.

"It has always looked to us as if written in the dark, by an agitated hand; but—"

I said nothing, the broken and unfinished scrawl was sufficiently eloquent.

"Did you friend declare Miss Grey to have written with a pencil and on a small piece of paper?"

"Yes, the pencil was at her bedside; the paper was torn from a book which lay there. She did not put the note when written in an envelop, but gave it to the valet just as it was. He is an old man and had come to her room for some final orders."

"The nurse saw all this? She has that book, I suppose?"

"No, it went out next morning, with the scraps. It was some pamphlet I believe."

The inspector turned the morsel of paper he here took up, over and over in his hand.

"What is this nurse's name?"

"Henrietta Pierson."

"How much does she know of your doubts?"

"I cannot say."

"You have seen her often?"

"No, only the once."

"Is she discreet?"

"Very. On this subject she will be like the grave unless forced by you to speak."

"And Miss Grey?"

"She is still ill, too ill to be disturbed by questions, especially on so delicate a topic. But she is getting well fast. Her father's fears as we heard them expressed on one memorable occasion were illfounded, sir."

Slowly the inspector inserted this scrap of paper between the folds of his pocketbook. He did not give me another look, tho I stood trembling before him. Was he in any way convinced or was he simply seeking for the most considerate way in which to dismiss me and my abominable theory? I could not gather his intentions from his expression and was feeling very faint and heartsick when he suddenly turned upon me with the remark:—

"A girl as ill as you say Miss Grey was must have had some very pressing matter on her mind to attempt to write and send a message under such difficulties. According to your idea she had some notion of her father's designs and wished to warn Mrs. Fairbrother against them. But don't you see that such conduct as this would be preposterous, nay, unparalleled in persons of their distinction? You must find some other explanation for Miss Grey's seemingly mysterious action and I another agent of crime than one of England's most reputable statesmen."

"So that Mr. Durand receives a like benefit of the doubt, I am content," said I. "It is the truth and the truth only I desire. I am willing to trust my cause with you."

He looked none too grateful for this confidence. Indeed, now that I look back upon this scene I do not wonder that he shrunk from the responsibility thus foisted upon him.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Prove something. Prove that I am altogether wrong or altogether right. Or if proof is not possible, pray allow me the privilege of doing what I can myself to clear up the matter."

"You?" There was apprehension, disapprobation, almost menace in his tone. I bore it with as steady and modest a glance as possible, saying, when I thought he was about to speak again:—

"I will do nothing without your sanction. I realize the dangers of this inquiry and the disgrace that would follow if our attempt was suspected before proof reached a point sufficient to justify it. It is not an open attack; I meditate but one—"

Here I whispered in his ear for several minutes. When I had finished he gave me a prolonged stare, then he laid his hand on my head.

"You are a little wonder," he declared. "But your ideas are very quixotic, very. However," he added, suddenly growing grave, "something may be excused a young girl who finds herself forced to choose between the guilt of her lover and that of a man esteemed great by the world but altogether removed from her and her natural sympathies."

"You acknowledge, then, that it lies between these two?"

"I see no third," said he.

I drew a breath of relief.

"Don't deceive yourself, Miss Van Arsdale; it is not among the possibilities that Mr. Grey has had any connection with this crime. He is an accentric man, that's all."

"But—but—"

"I will do my duty. I will satisfy you and myself on certain points, and if—"

I hardly breathed.

"There is the least doubt I will see you again and—"

The change he saw in me frightened away the end of his sentence. Turning upon me with some severity, he declared: "There are nine hundred and ninety-nine chances in a thousand that my next word to you will be to prepare yourself for Mr. Durand's arraignment and trial. But an infinitesimal chance remains to the contrary. If you choose to trust to it I can only admire your pluck and the great confidence you show in your unfortunate lover."

And with this half-hearted encouragement I was forced to be content, not only for that day but for many days, when—

VII.

Inspector Dalzell.

But before I proceed to relate what happened at the end of those two weeks, I must say a word or two in regard to what happened during them.

Nothing happened to improve Mr. Durand's position, and nothing openly to compromise Mr. Grey's. Mr. Fairbrother, from whose testimony many of us hoped something would be gleaned calculated to give a turn to the suspicion now centered on one man, continued ill in New Mexico; and all that could be learned from him of any importance was contained in a short letter dictated from his bed, in which he affirmed that the diamond, when it left him, was in an unique setting procured by himself in France; that he knew of no other jewel similarly mounted, and that if the false gem was set according to his own description, the probabilities were that the imitation stone had been put in place of the real one under his wife's direction and in some workshop in New York, as she was not the woman to take the trouble to send abroad for anything she could get done in this country. The description followed. It coincided with the one we all knew.

This was something of a blow to me. Public opinion would naturally reflect that of the husband, and it would require very strong evidence to combat a logical supposition of this kind with one so forced and seemingly extravagant as that upon which my own theory was based. Yet truth often transcends imagination, and having confidence in the inspector's integrity, I subdued my impatience for a week, almost for two, when my suspense and rapidly culminating dread of some action being taken against Mr. Durand were suddenly cut short by a message from the inspector, followed by his speedy presence in my uncle's house.

We have a little room on our parlor floor, very snug and very secluded, and in this room I received him. Seldom have I dreaded a meeting more and seldom have I been met with greater kindness and consideration. He was so kind that I feared he had only disappointing news to communicate, but his first words reassured me. He said:—

"I have come to place a great confidence in you. We have found enough truth in the suppositions you advanced at our last interview to warrant us in the attempt you yourself proposed for the elucidation of this mystery. That this is the most risky and altogether the most unpleasant duty which I have encountered during my several years of service, I am willing to acknowledge to one so sensible and at the same time of so much modesty as yourself. This English gentleman has a reputation which lifts him far above any unworthy suspicion, and were it not for the favorable impression made upon us by Mr. Durand in a long talk we had with him last night, I would sooner resign my place than pursue this matter against him. Success would create a horror on both sides of the water unprecedented during my career, while failure would bring down ridicule upon us which would destroy the prestige of the whole force. Do you see my difficulty, little woman? We cannot even approach this haughty and highly reputable Englishman with questions without calling down upon us the wrath of the whole English nation. We must be sure before we make a move, and for us to be sure where the evidence is all circumstantial, I know of no better plan than the one you were pleased to suggest and which at the time I was pleased to call quixotic."

Drawing a long breath, I surveyed him timidly. Never had I so realized my presumption or experienced such a thrill of joy in my frightened yet elated heart. They believed in Anson's innocence and trusted me. Insignificant as I was, it was to my exertions this great result was due. As I realized this, I felt my heart swell and my throat close. In despair of speaking, I held out my hands. He took them kindly and seemed to be quite satisfied.

"Such a trembling, tear-filled amazon!" he cried. "Will you have courage to undertake the task before you? If not—"

"Oh, but I have," said I. "It is your goodness and the surprise of it all which unnerves me. I can go thru what we have planned if you think the secret of my personality and interest in Mr. Durand can be kept from the people I go among."

"It can if you will follow our advice implicitly. You say that you know the doctor and that he stands ready to recommend you in case Miss Pierson withdraws her services."

"Yes, he is eager to give me a chance. He was a college mate of my father's."

"How will you explain to him your wish to enter upon your duties under another name?"

"Very simply. I have already told him that the publicity given my name in the late proceedings has made me very uncomfortable. That my first case of nursing would require all my self-possession and that if he did not think it wrong I should like to go to it under my mother's name. He made no dissent and I think I can persuade him that I would do much better work as Miss Ayres than as the too well-known Miss Van Arsdale."

"You have great powers of persuasion. But may you not meet people at the hotel who know you?"

"I shall try and avoid people; and, if my identity is discovered, its effect or non-effect upon one we find it difficult to mention will give us our clue. If he has no guilty interest in the crime my connection with it as a witness will not disturb him. Besides, two days of unsuspicious acceptance of me as Miss Grey' nurse are all I want. I shall take immediate opportunity, I assure you, to make the test I mentioned. But how much confidence you will have to repose in me! I comprehend all the importance of my undertaking, and will work as if my honor, as well as yours, were at stake."

"I am sure you will." Then for the first time in my life I was glad that I was small and plain rather than tall and fascinating like so many of my friends, for he said: "If you had been a tiumphant beauty, depending on your charms as a woman to win people to your will, we should never have listened to your proposition or risked our reputation in your hands. It is your wit, your earnestness and your quiet determination which have impressed us. You see I speak plainly. I do so because I respect you. And now to business."

Details followed. After these were well understood between us, I ventured to say: "Do you object—would it be asking too much—if I requested some enlightenment as to what facts you have discovered in connection with Mr. Grey which goes to substantiate my theory? I might work more intelligently."

"No, little woman, you would not work more intelligently, and you know it. But you have the natural curiosity of one whose very heart is bound up in this business. I could deny you what you ask but I won't, for I want you to work with quiet confidence, which you would not do if your mind was taken up with doubts and questions. Miss Van Arsdale, one surmise of yours was correct. That night a man was sent to the Ramsdell house with a note from Miss Grey. We know this because he boasted of it to one of the bell boys before he went out, saying that he was going to have a glimpse of one of the finest parties of the season. It is also true that this man was Mr. Grey's valet, an old servant who came over with him from England. But what adds weight to all this and makes us regard the whole affair with suspicion, is the additional fact that this man received his dismissal the following morning and has not been seen since by any one we could reach. This looks bad to begin with, like the suppression of evidence, you know. Then Mr. Grey has not been the same man since that night. He is full of care and this care is not entirely in connection with his daughter who is doing very well and bids fair to be up in a few days. But all this would be nothing if we had not received advices from England which prove that Mr. Grey's visit here has some elements of mystery in it. There was every reason for his remaining in his own country, where a political crisis is approaching, yet he crossed the water, bringing his sickly daughter with him. The explanation as volunteered by one who knew him well was this: That only his desire to see or acquire some jewel of importance could have taken him across the ocean at this time; nothing else rivaling his interest in governmental affairs. Still this would be nothing if a stiletto similar to the one employed in this crime had not once formed part of a collection of curios belonging to a cousin of his whom he often visited. This stiletto has been missing for some time, stolen as the owner declared, by some unknown person. All this looks bad enough, but when I tell you that a week before the fatal ball at Mr. Ramsdell's, Mr. Grey made a tour of the great jeweler shops on Broadway and, with the pretext of buying a diamond for his daughter, entered into a talk about famous stones, ending always with some question about the Fairbrother gem, you will see that his interest in that stone is established and that it only remains for us to discover if that interest is a guilty one. I cannot believe this possible, but you have our leave to make your experiment and see. Only do not count too much upon superstition. If he is the deep-dyed criminal you imagine, the cry which startled us all at a certain critical instant was raised by himself and for the purpose you suggested. None of the sensitiveness often shown by a man who has been surprised into crime, will be his. Relying on his reputation and the prestige of his great fame, he will, if he thinks himself under fire, face every shock unmoved."

"I see. I understand; he must believe himself all alone. Then, the natural man may appear. I thank you, inspector. That idea is of inestimable value to me, and I will act on it. And now, advise me how to circumvent my uncle and aunt, who must never know to what an undertaking I have committed myself."

Inspector Dalzell spared me another fifteen minutes, and this last detail of my scheme was arranged. Then he rose to go. As he turned from me he said:—

"Tomorrow?"

And I answered with a full heart, but a voice clear as my purpose:—

"Tomorrow."

VIII.

Grizel! Grizel!

"This is your patient. Your new nurse, my dear. What did you say your name was? Miss Ayers?"

"Yes, Mr. Grey, Alice Ayers."

"O, what a sweet name!"

This expressive greeting, and from the patient herself, was the first heartsting I received, a sting which brought a flush into my cheek I would fain have kept down.

"Since a change of nurses was necessary, I am glad they sent me one like you," the feeble, but musical voice went on, and I saw a wasted but eager hand stretched out.

In a whirl of strong feeling I advanced to take it. I had not counted on such a reception. I had not expected any bond of congeniality to spring up between this high-feeling English girl and myself to make my purpose hateful to me. Yet, as I stood there looking down at her bright if wasted face, I felt that it would be very easy to love so gentle and cordial a being, and dreaded raising my eyes to the gentleman at my side lest I should see something in him too to hamper me, and make this attempt which I had undertaken in such loyalty of spirit, a misery to myself and ineffectual to the man I had hoped to save by it. When I did look up and catch the first beams of Mr. Grey's keen blue eye fixed inquiringly on me, I neither knew what to think or how to act. He was so tall and firmly knit, and had such an intellectual aspect altogether. I was conscious of regarding him with a decided feeling of awe, and found myself forgetting why I had come there, and what my suspicions were,—suspicions which had carried hope with them,—hope for myself and hope for my lover, who would never escape the opprobrium, even if he did the punishment, of this great crime, were this, the only other person who could possibly be associated with it, found to be the fine, clear-souled man he appeared to be in this, my first interview with him.

Perceiving very soon that his apprehensions in my regard were limited to a fear lest I should not feel at ease in my new home under the restraint of a presence more accustomed to intimidate than attract strangers, I threw aside all doubts of myself and met the advances of both father and daughter with that quiet confidence which my position there demanded.

The result was such as both gratified and grieved me. As a nurse entering upon her first case I was happy, as a woman with an ulterior object in view verging upon the audacious and unspeakable, I was wretched and regretful, and just a little shaken in the conviction which had hitherto upheld me.

But, when later in the day I came upon this gentleman at his desk in the sitting-room, where he spent most of his time, I felt my doubts revive in view of the absorbing melancholy which darkened all his features as he sat in revery over his papers which he seemed not to have touched for hours. He looked like a man bowed down, not so much by grief as fear, and when, at some movement I made, he started up and met my eye, I could swear that his cheek was pale, and the firm carriage of his body shaken, and the whole man a victim to some strong and secret dread he vainly sought to hide. When I ventured to tell him what I wanted, he made an effort and pulled himself together, but I had seen him with his mask off, and his usually calm visage and self-possessed mien could never again deceive me.

It was on this same night, and before I could formulate my plans, that he surprised us with a decision very disturbing to myself, if not to his daughter. He was going away for a short time,—he did not say where. Would his daughter spend her time in getting better and I mine in seeing that she did so?

What could we do? What could I do? It was all too sudden for any action on my part, and I was forced to see him leave, unaccompanied and without police surveillance.

Would he come back? I asked myself this more than once. He had kissed his daughter with more than usual feeling, and when the door closed on him it was to leave a vision in my mind of one who had glanced back at the one object of his affections with the passion of a longer farewell than was expressed in his cheery and encouraging words. I was startled, and found it hard to play the comforter to the gentle-hearted creature who loved him. But I had nerved myself to great self-repression, and after acquainting the inspector with what had happened, I got thru that night and the next day with some degree of patience. But the two days following were a trial, and I was gradually succumbing to a nervous attack, when Mr. Grey reappeared amongst us, saying nothing about his journey, but overjoyed to all appearance to find roses on his daughter's cheek instead of the lilies he had left there. Where had he been? To dispose of or secrete the real diamond? Impossible for me to tell; but I resolved that not another day should pass without my making the daring attempt upon the outcome of which so many interests hung.

But it was not till the day following that the proper opportunity offered. Meanwhile, I had received private instructions to go ahead and fear nothing. This had greatly encouraged me. Nevertheless, I felt very weak and helpless when the hour came, and I found myself on the brink of what must bring me great pain and life-long regret whichever way it fell out.

The scene is vividly before me. The day was a gloomy one, rain falling on snow, and, tho the rooms had a pleasant outlook, the atmosphere was so oppressive, and the whole apartment so dark, that at 4 o'clock I turned on the electric light over Mr. Grey's desk in the sitting-room. On this desk I had already laid in full sight the stiletto entrusted to me by the inspector. Mr. Grey was expected in at any moment, and it was his custom,—on entering,—as I had long before noticed, to go immediately to his desk with the letters he invariably brought up with him from the office. There was every reason to believe he would do the same today, and I had arranged an errand which would bring me on the scene at the moment his eyes first fell upon the weapon I had laid there. If he quailed,—and how could he help doing so if guilty,—a great doubt would be removed from my own breast, and a great impediment from police action. But, Oh! the responsibility—and Oh! the torture of those few minutes of waiting, during which I lingered on the other side of the communicating door, with a tray of dishes in my hand and my ear strained to catch the sound of his footsteps crossing the room! Ah! there he is at the hall door!—now he is in;—now he is at his desk, and now.

Softly I pushed the door. Softly it swung open, and I caught the look on his face.

He was bending over the stiletto, and an exclamation was on his lips, but it was the simple one of surprise. I could even catch the words he let fall.

Here they are:—

"This is singular. The very one! or enough like it to make a man stare. But why here! I must fathom this mystery." And he turned in the most natural way to ring the bell.

My disappointment was so great, my humiliation so unbounded that, forgetting everything in my dismay, I staggered where I stood and let the tray with all its contents slip from my hands. The crash that followed stopped Mr. Grey in his action. But it did something more. It awoke a cry from the further doorway which I shall never forget; and while we both started and turned to see from whom this grievous sound had sprang, a man came stumbling in with his hands before his eyes and this name wild on his lips:—

"Grizel! Grizel!"

Mrs. Fairbrother's name! and the man—

IX.

Another Net Closes.

The man was Abner Fairbrother, the victim's husband. This fact was borne in upon us by the passion of his cry:—

"Grizel! Grizel!"

But why here? and why such fury in Mr. Grey's face as he recognized him?

The latter's words, as he leaped forward and collared the man, soon enlightened me.

"Fairbrother! you villain! Why do you call upon your wife? Are you murderer as well as thief?" And dropping his hand from the other's throat as suddenly as he had seized it, he caught up the stiletto, crying: "Do you recognize this?"

Ah, then I saw guilt!

In silence worse than any cry, this so-called husband of the murdered woman, the man upon whom no suspicion had fallen, the man whom all had thought a thousand miles away at the time of the deed, stared at the weapon thrust under his eyes, while over his face passed all those expressions of fear, abhorrence and detected guilt which, fool that I was, I had expected to see reflected in response to the same test in Mr. Grey's equable countenance.

The surprise and wonder of it held me chained to the spot. I was in a state of stupefaction, so that I scarecely noted the broken fragments at my feet. But the intruder noticed them. Wrenching his gaze from the stiletto which Mr. Grey continued to hold out, he pointed at the broken cup and saucer, muttering:—

"That is what startled me into this betrayal—the noise of breaking china. I cannot bear it since—"

He stopped, bit his lip and looked around him with an air of sudden bravado.

"Since you dropped the cups at your wife's feet in Mr. Ramsdell's alcove," finished Mr. Grey with admirable self-possession.

"I see that explanations from myself are not in order," was the grim retort, launched with the bitterest sarcasm. Then as the full weight of his position crushed in upon him, his face assumed an aspect startling to my unaccustomed eyes, and thrusting his hand into his pocket he drew forth a small box which he placed in Mr. Grey's hands.

"The Great Mogul," he declared simply.

It was the first time I had heard this diamond so named.

Without a word that gentleman opened the box, took one look at the contents, assumed a satisfied air, and carefully deposited the recovered gem in his own pocket. As his eyes returned to the man before him, all the passion of the latter burst forth.

"It was not for that I killed her!" cried he. "It was because she defied me and flaunted her disobedience in my face. I would do it again, yet—"

Here his voice broke and it was in a different tone and with a total change of manner he added: "You stand appalled at my depravity. You have not lived my life." Then quickly and with a touch of sullenness. "You suspected me because of the stiletto. It was a mistake, using that stiletto. Otherwise, the plan was good. I doubt if you know now how I found my way into the alcove, possibly under your very eyes; certainly, under the eyes of many who knew me."

"I do not. It is enough that you entered it; that you confess your guilt."

Here Mr. Grey stretched his hand towards the electric button.

"No, it is not enough." The tone was fierce, authoritative. "Do not ring the bell, not yet. I have a fancy to tell you how I managed that little affair."

Glancing about, he caught up from a table near by a small brass tray. Emptying it of its contents, he turned upon us with drawn down features and an obsequious air so opposed to his natural manner that it was as if another man stood before us.

"Jardon my black tie," he muttered holding out the tray towards Mr. Grey.

A waiter! He had entered the Ramsdell house as a waiter! There was no mistaking the attitude or the sleek appearance he had assumed.

Mr. Grey uttered an exclamation. Instantly the tray was thrown aside and the man resumed his ordinary aspect.

"I see you understand me," he cried. "I who have played host at many a ball, passed myself off that night as one of the waiters. I came and went and no one noticed me. It is such a natural sight to see a waiter passing ices that my going in and out of the alcove did not attract the least attention. I never look at waiters when I attend balls. I never look higher than their trays. No one looked at me higher than my tray. I held the stiletto under the tray and when I struck her she threw up her hands and they hit the tray and the cups fell. I have never been able to bear the sound of breaking china since. I loved her—"

A gasp and he recovered himself.

"That is neither here nor there," he muttered. "You summoned me under threat to present myself at your door today. I have done so. I meant to restore you your diamond, simply. It has become worthless to me. But fate exacted more. Surprise forced my secret from me. That young lady with her damnable awkwardness has put my head in a noose. But do not think to hold it there. I did not risk this interview without precautions and when I leave this hotel it will be as a free man."

With one of his rapid changes, wonderful and inexplicable to me at the moment, he turned towards me with a bow, saying courteously enough:—

"We will excuse the young lady."

Next moment the barrel of a pistol gleamed in his hand.

The moment was critical. Mr. Grey stood directly in the line of fire, and the audacious man who thus held him at his mercy was scarcely a foot from the door. Marking the desperation of his look and the steadiness of his finger on the trigger, I expected to see Mr. Grey recoil and the man escape. But Mr. Grey held his own, tho he made no move, and did not venture to speak. Nerved by his courage, I summoned up all my own. This man must not escape, nor must Mr. Grey suffer. The pistol directed against him must be diverted to myself. Such amends were due one whose good name I had so deeply if secretly insulted. Remembering the sick girl, I did not scream, but, throwing myself towards the bell, I cried out that I would raise the house if he moved, and laid my finger on the button.

The pistol swerved my way. The face above it smiled. I watched that smile. Before it broadened to its full extent, I pressed the button.

Fairbrother stared, dropped his pistol, and burst forth with these two words:—

"Brave girl!"

The tone I can never convey.

Then he made for the door.

As he passed thru it he called back:—

"I have been in worse straits than this."

But he never had. When, after some words of gratitude and surprising commendation from Mr. Grey, which I chiefly remember from the immense effort it cost me not to betray my own sense of shame at the part I had really played in this matter, I ventured to peer into the hall; it was to see Mr. Fairbrother standing silent and downcast between two men, one of whom held the pistol he had recently flourished. One of these men was my little detective, the other,—the inspector himself.

They had not left me then entirely to my own devices. Hidden in the embrasure of a near-by recess, they had seen and heard,—what?

Glancing back at Mr. Grey, who had followed me to the door, I ventured a timid suggestion:—

"It looks as if you were wanted there," I said. Then I went back to my patient.

Later, it was all explained. Mr. Grey, looking like another man, came into the room where I was endeavoring to soothe his startled daughter and devour in secret my own joy; taking the sweet girl in his arms, he said, with a calm ignoring of my presence, at which I secretly smiled:—

"This is the happiest moment of my existence, Helen. I feel as if I had recovered you from the brink of the grave."

"Me? Why, I have never been so ill as that."

"I know; but I have felt as if you were doomed ever since I heard, or thought I heard, in this city, and under no ordinary circumstances, the peculiar cry which haunts our house on the eve of any great misfortune. I will not apologize for my fears; you know that I have good cause for them, but today, only today, I have heard from the lips of the most arrant knave I have ever known, that this cry sprang from himself with intent to deceive me. He knew my weakness; knew the cry; he was in Darlington manor when Cecilia died; and, wishing to startle me into dropping something which I held, made use of his ventriloquial powers (he had been a mountebank once, poor wretch), and, with such effect, that I have not been a happy man since, notwithstanding your daily improvement and continued promise of recovery. But I am happy now, relieved and joyful; and this miserable being,—would you like to hear his story? Are you strong enough for anything so tragic? He is a thief and a murderer, but he has feelings, and his life has been a curious one, and strangely interwoven with ours. Do you care to hear about it? He is the man who stole our diamond."

My patient uttered a little cry.

"O, tell me," she entreated, excited, but not unhealthfully; while I was in an anguish of curiosity I could with difficulty conceal.

Mr. Grey turned with courtesy towards me and asked if a few family details would bore me. I smiled and assured him to the contrary. At which he settled himself in the chair he liked best and began a tale which I will permit myself to present to you complete and from other points of view than his own.

Some five years before, one of the great diamonds of the world was offered for sale in an eastern market. Mr. Grey, who stopped at no expense in the gratification of his taste in this direction, immediately sent his agent to Egypt to examine this stone, and if he discovered it to be all that was claimed for it, and within the reach of a wealthy commoner's purse, to buy it. Upon inspection, it was found to be all that was claimed with one exception. In the center of one of the facets was a flaw, but, as this was considered to mark the diamond, and rather add to than detract from its value as a traditional stone, with many historical associations, it was finally purchased by Mr. Grey and placed among his treasures in his manor-house in Kent. Never a suspicious man, he took delight in exhibiting this acquisition to such of his friends and acquaintances as were likely to feel any interest in it, and it was not an uncommon thing for him to allow it to pass from hand to hand while he pottered over his other treasures and displayed this and that to such as had no eyes for the diamond.

It was after one such occasion that he found, on taking the stone in his hand to replace it in the safe he had had built for it in one of his cabinets, that it did not strike his eye with its usual force and brilliancy, and on examining it closely, he discovered the absence of the tell-tale flaw. Struck with dismay, he submitted it to a still more rigid inspection, when he found that what he held was not even a diamond, but a worthless bit of glass, which had been substituted by some cunning knave for his valuable gem.

For the moment his humiliation almost equaled his sense of loss; he had been so often warned of the danger he ran in letting so priceless an object pass around under all eyes but his own. His wife and friends had prophesied some such loss as this, not once, but many times, and he had always laughed at their fears, saying that he knew his friends, and that there was not a sacmp amongst them. But now he saw is proved that even the intuition of a man well versed in human nature is not always infallible, and, ashamed of his past laxness and more ashamed yet of the doubts which this experience called up in regard to all his friends, he shut up the false stone with his usual care and buried his loss in his own bosom, till he could sift his impressions and recall with some degree of probability the circumstances under which this exchange could have been made.

It had not been made that evening. Of this he was positive. The only persons present on this occasion were friends of such standing and repute that suspicion in their regard was simply monstrous. When and to whom, then, had he shown the diamond last? Alas, it had been a long month since he had shown the jewel. Cecilia, his youngest daughter, had died in the interim; therefore his mind had not been on jewels. A month!—time for his precious diamond to have been carried back to the east! Time for it to have been recut! Surely it was lost to him forever unless he could immediately locate the person who had robbed him of it.

But this promised difficulties. He could not remember just what persons he had entertained on that especial day in his little hall of cabinets, and, when he did succeed in getting a list of them from his butler, he was by no means sure that it included the full number of his guests. His own memory was execrable, and in short he had but few facts to offer to the discreet agent sent up from Scotland Yard one morning to hear his complaint and act secretly in his interests. He could give him carte blanche to carry on his inquiries in the diamond market, but little else. And while this seemed to satisfy the agent, it did not lead to any gratifying result to himself, and he had thoroly made up his mind to swallow his loss and say nothing about it, when one day a young cousin of his living in great style in an adjoining county, informed him that in some mysterious way he had lost from his collection of arms a unique and highly priced stiletto of Italian workmanship.

Startled at the coincidence, Mr. Grey ventured upon a question or so which led to his cousin's confiding to him the fact that this article had disappeared after a large supper given by him to a number of friends and gentlemen from London. This piece of knowledge still further coincided with his own experience, caused Mr. Grey to ask for a list of his guests, in the hope of finding among them one who had been in his own house.

His cousin, quite unsuspicious of the motives underlying this request, hastened to write out this list, and together they pored over the names, crossing out such as were absolutely above suspicion. When they had reached the end of the list, but two names remained uncrossed. One was that of a rattle-pated youth who had come in the wake of a highly reputed connection of theirs, and the other that of an American tourist who gave all the evidences of great wealth and had presented letters to leading men in London which had insured him attentinos. This man's name was Fairbrother, and the moment Mr. Grey heard it, he recalled the fact that an American with a peculiar name, but with a reputation for wealth, had been among his guests on the suspected evening.

Hiding the effect produced upon him by this discovery, he placed his finger on this name and begged his cousin to look up its owner's antecedents and present reputation in America; but not content with this, he sent his own agent over to New York—whither, as he soon learned, this gentleman had returned. The result was an apparent vindication of the suspected American. He was found to be a well-known citizen of the great metropolis, moving in the highest circles and with a reputation for wealth won by an extraordinary business instinct.

To be sure he had not always enjoyed these distinctions. Like many another self-made man, he had risen from a menial position in a western mining camp, to be the owner of a mine himself and so up thru the various gradations of a successful life to a position among the foremost business men of New York. In all these changes he had maintaned a name for honest, if not generous, dealing. He lived in great style, had married and was known to have but one extravagant fancy. This was for the unique and curious in art, a taste which, if report spoke true, cost him many thousands each year.

This last was the only clause in the report which pointed in any way towards this man being the possible abstractor of the Great Mogul, as Mr. Grey's famous diamond was called, and the latter was too just a man and too much of a fancier in this line himself to let a fact of this kind weigh against the favorable nature of the rest. So he recalled his agent, double-locked his cabinets and continued to confine his display of valuables to articles which did not suggest jewels. Thus three years passed, when one day he heard mention made of a wonderful diamond which had been seen in New York. From its description he gathered that it must be the one surreptitiously abstracted from his cabinet, and when, after some careful inquiries, he learned that the name of its possessor was Fairbrother, he awoke to his old suspicions and determined to probe this mysterious matter to the bottom. But secretly. He still had too much consideration to attack a man in his position without full proof.

Knowing of no one he could trust with so delicate an inquiry as this had now become, he decided to undertake it himself, and for this purpose embraced the first opportunity to cross the water. He took his daughter with him because he had resolved never to let his one remaining child out of his sight. But she knew nothing of his plans or reason for travel. No one did. Indeed, only his lawyer and the police were aware of the loss of his diamond.

His first surprise on landing was to learn that Mr. Fairbrother, of whose marriage he had heard, had quarreled with his wife and that in the separation which had occurred, the diamond had fallen to her share and was consequently in her possession at the present moment.

This changed matters, and Mr. Grey's only thought now was to surprise her with the diamond on her person and by one glance assure himself that it was indeed the Great Mogul. Since Mrs. Fairbrother was reported to be a beautiful woman and a great society belle, he saw no reason why he should not meet her publicly, and that very soon. He therefore allowed himself to accept invitations and attend theaters and balls, tho his daughter had suffered from her voyage and was not able to accompany him. But, alas! he soon learned that Mrs. Fairbrother was never seen with her diamond and, one evening after an introduction at the opera, that she never talked about it. So there he was balked on the very threshold of his enterprise, and, recognizing the fact, was preparing to take his now seriously ailing daughter south, when he received an invitation to a ball of such a select character that he decided to remain to it, in the hope that Mrs. Fairbrother would be tempted to put on all her splendor for so magnificent a function and thus gratify him with a sight of his own diamond. During the days that intervened he saw her several times and very soon decided that, in spite of her reticence in regard to this gem, she was not sufficiently in her husband's confidence to know the secret of its real ownership. This encouraged him to attempt piquing her into wearing the diamond on this occasion. He talked of precious stones and finally of his own, declaring that he had a connoisseur's eye for a fine diamond, but had seen none as yet in America to compete with a specimen or two he had in his own cabinets. Her eye flashed at this and, tho she said nothing, he felt sure that her presence at Mr. Ramsdell's house would be enlivened by her great jewel.

So much for Mr. Grey's attitude in this matter up to the night of the ball. It is interesting enough, but that of Abner Fairbrother is more interesting and much more serious.

His was indeed the hand which had abstracted the diamond from Mr. Grey's collection. Under ordinary conditions he was an honest man. He prized his good name and would not willingly risk it, but he had little real conscience, and once his passions were aroused nothing short of the object desired would content him. At once forceful and subtle, he had at his command infinite resources, which his wandering and eventful life had heightened almost to the point of genius. He saw this stone, and at once felt an inordinate desire to possess it. He had coveted other men's treasures before, but not as he coveted this. What had been longing in other cases was mania in this. There was a woman in America whom he loved. She was beautiful and she was splendor-loving. To see her with this glory on her breast would be worth almost any risk which his imagination could picture at the moment. Before the diamond had left his hand he had made up his mind to have it for his own. He knew that it could not be bought, so he set about obtaining it by an act he did not hesitate to acknowledge to himself as criminal. But he did not act without precautions. Having a keen eye and a proper sense of size and color, he carried away from his first view of it a true image of the stone, and when he was next admitted to Mr. Grey's cabinet room he had the means provided for deceiving the owner whose character he had sounded.

(To Be Concluded Next Sunday.)

Mr. Allison, who is 70 years old, and who graduated at Missouri university in 1852, has re-entered the university in order to take a special course in surveying.

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