

The House of the Whispering Pines

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

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PROLOGUE

English detective stories have their waxing and their waning in public favor; their American imitations hold the readers' attention for a time; French and German acuteness in the devising of original plots engages our interest until the tales of newer vicissitudes are told, but Anna Katharine Green's detective stories, based on incidents of American life, are perennial bloomers. They know no permanent rivals in American liking.

In the writing of stories with originality of plot, skillful depiction of character, interest of incident, intricacy of mystery and boldness of denouement no foreign novelist can hope to compete for American favor with this American woman writer.

Read "The House of the Whispering Pines," a story of love and crime and mystery, told in her best vein. We warrant it to be one of her best and therefore one of the world's best.

CHAPTER I

THE moon rode high, but ominous clouds were rushing toward it—clouds heavy with snow. I watched these clouds as I drove recklessly, desperately over the winter roads, and I had missed the desire of my life, the one precious treasure which I coveted with my whole undisciplined heart, and not being what you call a man of self-restraint, I was chafed by my defeat far beyond the bounds I have usually set for myself.

I rode on, hardly conscious of my course, till the rapid recurrence of several well-known landmarks warned me that I had taken the longest route home and that in another moment I should be skirting the grounds of the Whispering Pines country club-house. The season was over and the clubhouse closed, and when, the great stack of chimneys coming suddenly into view against the broad disk of the still unclouded moon, I perceived a thin trail of smoke soaring up from their midst, I realized that I had taken that there should be no such sign of life in a house I myself had closed, locked and barred that very day.

I was the president of the club and felt responsible. I turned in at the lower gateway. For reasons which I need not now state there were no bells attached to my cutter, and consequently my approach was noiseless. I was careful that it should be so; also careful to stop short of the front door and leave my horse and sleigh in the black depths of the pine grove, pressing up to the walls on either side. I was sure that all was not as it should be inside these walls.

Our clubhouse stands, as it may be necessary to remind you, on a knoll thickly wooded with the ancient trees I have mentioned. These trees—oaks and pines and of a growth unusual and of an aspect well high holly—extend only to the rear end of the house, where a wide stretch of gently undulating ground opens at once upon the eye, suggesting to all lovers of golf the admirable use to which it is put from early spring to latest fall. Now links as well as parterres and driveways were lying under an even blanket of winter snow. No other building stood with a half mile in any direction.

I felt the isolation as I stepped from the edge of the trees and prepared to cross the few feet of open space leading to the main door. In some moods I should have paused and thought twice before attempting the door, behind which in the dark lurked the unknown with its naturally accompanying suggestion of peril. But rage and disappointment, working hotly within me, had left no space for fear. Rather rejoicing in the doubtfulness of the adventure, I pushed my way through the snow until my feet struck the steps. Here I paused for a moment to stop and glance quickly up and down the building either way. Not a gleam of light met my eye from the smallest scintillating pane. Was the house as soundless as it was dark?

I listened, but heard nothing. I listened again and still heard nothing. Then I proceeded boldly up the steps and laid my hand on the door.

It was unlatched and yielded to my touch. Light or no light, sound or no sound, there was some one within. The fire which had sent its attenuated streak of smoke up into the moonlight air was burning yet on one of the many hearths within. I proceeded to enter and close the door carefully behind me. As I did so I cast an involuntary glance without. The sky was ink, and a few wandering flakes of the now rapidly advancing storm came whirling in, biting my cheeks and stinging my forehead.

Once inside I stopped short, possibly to listen again, possibly to assure myself as to what I had best do next. The silence was profound. Not a sound disturbed the great, empty building. My own footfall as I stirred seemed to wake extraordinary echoes. I had moved but a few steps, yet to my heightened senses the noise seemed loud enough to wake the dead. Instinctively I stopped and stood stock still. There was no answering cessation of movement—darkness, silence everywhere. Yet not quite absolute darkness. As my eyes grew accustomed to the place I found it possible to discern the outlines of the windows and locate the stairs and the arches where the side halls opened. I was even able to pick out the exact spot where the great antlers spread themselves above the hat rack, and presently the rack itself came into view, with its row of empty pegs, yesterday so full, today quite empty. That rack interested me, I hardly knew why, and regardless of the noise I made I crossed over to it and ran my hand along the wall underneath. The result was startling. A man's coat and hat hung from one of the pegs.

Would this hat and coat identify the intruder? I would strike a light and see. But this involved difficulties. The gas had been turned off that very morning, and I had no matches in my pocket. But I remembered where they could be found. I had seen them when I passed through the kitchen earlier in the day.

I began to move that way and presently came creeping back with a match-box half full of matches in my hand. But I did not strike one then. I had just made a move to do so when the unmistakable sound of a door opening somewhere in the house made me draw back in great haste and in great alarm. I had just made a move to do so when the unmistakable sound of a door opening somewhere in the house made me draw back in great haste and in great alarm.

I had hardly taken up my stand when the door opened above me to a faint glimmer and a step became audible coming from some one of the many small rooms in the second story, but slowly and with evident hesitation.

The light steadily increased with each step, but the uncertain step paused, and a sob came faintly to my ears, wrung from lips stiff with human anguish. The sound of the sigh struck shudderingly on my ear, followed by the renewal of the step and the almost immediate appearance on the stairs of a beautiful young girl of seventeen holding a candle in one hand and shielding her left cheek with the other.

Nothing could have prepared me for an encounter with this woman anywhere that night after what had

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