

INITIALS ONLY

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN
AUTHOR OF "THE LEAVENWORTH CASE"
"THE FILIGREE BALL" "THE HOUSE OF THE WHISPERING PINES"
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SYNOPSIS.

George Anderson and wife see a remarkable looking man come out of the Clermont hotel, look around furtively, pass his hands in the snow and pass on. Anderson attracts them to the Clermont, where it is found that the beautiful Miss Edith Challoner has fallen dead. Anderson describes the man he saw wash his hands in the snow. The hotel manager declares him to be Orlando Brotherson. Physicians find that Miss Challoner was strangled and not shot, which seems to clear Brotherson of suspicion. Green, an expert detective, and Sweetwater, his assistant, take up the case. Mr. Challoner tells of a batch of letters found in his daughter's desk, signed "O. B." All the love letters except one, which shows that the writer was displeased. This letter was signed by Orlando Brotherson. Anderson goes with Sweetwater to identify Brotherson, who is found in a tenement under the name of O. B. Sweetwater recalls the mystery of the murder of a washerwoman in which some details were similar to the case of Miss Challoner. Sweetwater gets into the same building with Brotherson. He watches the inventor at work at night and is detected by the latter. The detective moves to a room adjoining Brotherson's. He hears a noise in the wall to spy on Brotherson. He visits him and assists the inventor in his work. A girl sent by Sweetwater with Edith Challoner's letters is ordered out by Brotherson. He declares the letters were not written by him. Sweetwater is unmasked by Brotherson, who declares he recognized him at once. The discovery is made that the letters signed "O. B." were written by two different men. Sweetwater goes to Doris in search of the second "O. B." who he expects to locate through one Doris Scott, mentioned in the letters. Sweetwater comes across a peculiar but in the woods. He sees a load of boxes marked "O. B." Brotherson is taken into the room under the supervision of Doris Scott. Doris tells Challoner of seeing in a dream the face of the man who killed Edith. Orlando is greatly agitated at the realization that he has fallen in love with Doris.

CHAPTER XXX.—Continued.

"This, I make no apologies and expect in answer nothing more than an unequivocal yes or no. You tell me that you have never met my brother. Can that be said of the other members of your family—of your deceased daughter, in fact?"

"No."

"She was acquainted with Oswald Brotherson."

"She was?"

"Without your knowledge?"

"Entirely so."

"Corresponded with him?"

"Not exactly."

"How, not exactly?"

"He wrote to her—occasionally. She wrote to him frequently—but she never sent her letters."

"Ah!"

The exclamation was sharp, short and conveyed little. Yet with its escape, the whole scaffolding of this man's hold upon life and his own fate went down in indistinguishable chaos. Mr. Challoner realized a sense of havoc, though the eyes bent upon his countenance had not wavered, nor the stalwart figure moved.

"I have read some of those letters," the inventor finally acknowledged.

"The police took great pains to place them under my eye, supposing them to have been meant for me because of the initials written on the wrapper. But they were meant for Oswald. You believe that now?"

"I know it."

"And that is why I found you in the same house with him."

"It is. Providence has robbed me of my daughter; if this brother of yours should prove to be the man I am led to expect, I shall ask him to take that place in my heart and life which was once hers."

A quick recoil, a smothered exclamation on the part of the man he addressed. A barb had been hidden in this simple statement which had reached some deeply-hidden but vulnerable spot in Brotherson's breast, which had never been pierced before. It was a sight no man could see unmoved. Mr. Challoner turned sharply away, in dread of the abyss which the next word he uttered might open between them.

But Orlando Brotherson possessed resources of strength of which, possibly, he was not aware himself. When Mr. Challoner, still more affected by the silence than by the dread he had mentioned, turned to confront him again, it was to find his features composed and his glance clear. He had conquered all outward manifestation of the mysterious emotion which for an instant had laid his proud spirit low.

"You are considerate of my brother," were the words with which he reopened this painful conversation. "You will not find your confidence misplaced. Oswald is a straightforward fellow, of few faults."

"I believe it. No man can be so universally beloved without some very substantial claims to regard. I am glad to see that your opinion, though given somewhat coldly, coincides with that of his friends."

"I am not given to exaggeration," was the even reply.

Nothing which had yet passed showed that this man realized the fact that Oswald had been kept in ignorance of Miss Challoner's death. If these brothers were to meet on the morrow, it must be with the full understanding that this special topic was to be completely avoided. But in what words could he urge such a request upon this man? None suggested themselves, yet he had promised Miss Scott that he would insure his silence in this regard, and it was with this difficulty and no other he had been struggling when Mr. Brotherson came upon him in the other room.

"You have still something to say," suggested the latter, as an oppressive silence swallowed up that icy sentence I have already recorded.

"I have," returned Mr. Challoner, regarding his courage under the exigencies of the moment. "Miss Scott is very anxious to have your promise that you will avoid all disagreeable topics with your brother till the doctor pronounces him strong enough to meet the trouble which awaits him."

"You mean—"

"He is not as unhappy as we. He knows nothing of the affliction which has befallen him. He was taken ill—the rest was almost insupportable."

"Do you think I should be apt to broach this subject with anyone, let alone with him, whose connection with it I shall need days to realize? I'm not so given to gossip. Besides, he and I have other topics of interest. I have an invention ready with which I propose to experiment in a place he has already prepared for me. We can talk about that."

The trony, the hardy self-possession with which this was said struck Mr. Challoner to the heart. Without a word he wheeled about towards the door. Without a word, Brotherson stood, watching him go till he saw his hand fall on the knob when he quietly prevented his exit by saying:

"Unhappy truths can be long concealed. How soon does the doctor think my brother can bear these inevitable revelations?"

"He said this morning that if his patient were as well tomorrow as his present condition gives promise of, he might be told in another week."

Orlando bowed his appreciation of this fact, but added quickly:

"Who is to do the telling?"

"Doris," nobody else could be trusted with so delicate a task.

"I wish to be present."

Mr. Challoner looked up, surprised at the feeling with which this request was charged.

"As his brother—his only remaining relative, I have that right. Do you think that Doris—that Miss Scott, can be trusted not to forestall that moment by any previous hint of what awaits him?"

"If she so promises. But will you exact this from her? It surely cannot be necessary for me to say that your presence will add infinitely to the difficulty of her task."

"Yet it is a duty I cannot shirk. I will consult the doctor about it. I will make him see that I both understand and shall insist upon my rights in this matter. But you may tell Miss Doris that I will sit out of sight, and that I shall not intrude myself unless my name is brought up in an undesirable way."

The hand on the door-knob made a sudden movement.

"Mr. Brotherson, I can hear no more tonight. With your permission, I will leave this question to be settled by others." And with a repetition of his former bow, the bereaved father withdrew.

Orlando watched him till the door closed, then he too dropped his mask. But it was as again, when in a little while he passed through the sitting-room on his way upstairs.

No other day in his whole life had been like this to the hardy inventor; for in it both his heart and his conscience had been awakened, and up to this hour he had not really known that he possessed either.

CHAPTER XXXI.

What is He Making?

Other boxes addressed to O. Brotherson had been received at the station, and carried to the mysterious shed in the woods; and now, with locked door and lifted top, the elder brother contemplated his stores and prepared himself for work.

He had been allowed a short interview with Oswald, and he had indulged himself in a few words with Doris. But he had left those memories behind with other and more serious matters. Nothing that could enervate his hand or weaken his insight should enter this spot sacred to his great hope. Here genius reigned. Here he was himself wholly and without flaw—a Titan with his grasp on a mechanical idea by means of which he would soon rule the world.

Not so happy were the other characters in this drama. Oswald's thoughts, disturbed for a short time again, in silent love and longing; while Doris, with a double dread now in her heart, went about her daily tasks, praying for strength to endure the horrors of this week, without betraying the anxieties secretly devouring her.

And Mr. Challoner? The sight of Brotherson, though they never really

met, acted like acid upon a wound, and it was not till six days had passed and the dreaded Sunday was at hand, that he slept with any sense of rest or went his way about the town without that halting at the corners which betrayed his perpetual apprehension of a most undesirable encounter.

The reason for this change will be apparent in the short conversation he held with a man he had come upon one evening in the small park just beyond the workmen's dwellings.

"You see I am here," was the stranger's low greeting.

"Thank God," was Mr. Challoner's reply, "I could not have faced tomorrow alone and I doubt if Miss Scott could have found the requisite courage. Does she know that you are here?"

"I stopped at her door."

"Was that safe?"

"I think so. Mr. Brotherson—the Brooklyn one—is up in his shed. He sleeps there now, I am told, and soundly too I've no doubt."

"What is he making?"

"What half the inventors on both sides of the water are engaged upon just now. A monoplane, or a biplane, or some machine for carrying men through the air. I know, for I helped him with it. But you'll find that if he succeeds in this undertaking, and I believe he will, nothing short of fame awaits him. His invention has started him up. I'll be true enough to him for that. As an inventor he has my sympathy; but—well, we will see what he shall see, tomorrow. You say that he is bound to be present when Miss Scott relates her tragic story. I've won't be the only unseen listener. I've made my own arrangements with Miss Scott. If he feels the need of watching her and his brother Oswald, I feel the need of watching him."

"You take a burden of intolerable weight from my shoulders. Now I shall feel easier about that interview. But I should like to ask you this: Do you feel justified in this continued surveillance of a man who has so frequently and with such evident sincerity, declared his innocence?"

"I do that, if he's as guiltless as he says he is, my watchfulness won't hurt him. If he's not, then, Mr. Challoner, I've but one duty; to match his strength with my patience. That man is the one great mystery of the day, and mysteries call for solution. At least, there's the way a detective looks at it."

"May heaven help your efforts!"

"I shall need its assistance," was the dry rejoinder. Sweetwater was by no means blind to the difficulties awaiting him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Tell Me. Tell It All.

The day was a gray one, the first of the kind in weeks. As Doris stepped into the room where Oswald sat, she felt how much a ray of sunshine would have encouraged her and yet how truly these leaden skies and this dismal atmosphere expressed the gloom which soon must fall upon this hopeful, smiling man.

Advancing slowly, and not answering because she did not hear some casual remark of his, she took her stand by his side and then slowly and with her eyes on his face, sank down upon her knees, still without speaking, almost without breathing.

"What is the matter, child? So weary, eh? Nothing worse than that, I hope."

"Are you quite strong this morning? Strong enough to listen to my troubles; strong enough to bear your own if God sees fit to send them?" came hesitatingly from her lips as she watched the effect of each word, in breathless anxiety.

"Troubles? There can be but one trouble for me," was his unexpected reply. "That I do not fear—will not fear in my hour of happy recovery. So long as Edith is well—Doris! Doris! You alarm me. Edith is not ill—not ill!"

The poor child could not answer save with her sympathetic look and halting, tremulous breath; and these signs, he would not, could not read, his own words had made such an echo in his ears.

"I cannot imagine Edith ill. I always see her in my thoughts, as I saw her on that day of our first meeting; a perfect, animated woman with the joyous look of a glad, harmonious nature. Nothing has ever clouded that vision. If she were ill I would have known it. We are so truly one—that—Doris, Doris, you do not speak. You know the depth of my love, the terror of my thoughts. Is Edith ill?"

The eyes gazing wildly into his, slowly left his face and raised themselves aloft, with a sublime look. Would he understand? Yes, he understood, and the cry which rang from his lips stopped for a moment at the beating of more than one heart in that little cottage.

"Dead!" he shrieked, and fell back fainting in his chair, his lips still murmuring in semi-unconsciousness, "Dead! dead!"

Doris sprang to her feet, thinking of nothing but his wavering, slipping life till she saw his breath return, his eyes refill with light.

But the rest must be told; his brother exacted it and so did the situation. Further waiting, further hiding of the truth would be insupportable after this. But oh, the bitterness of it! No wonder that she turned away from those frenzied, wildly-demanding eyes.

"Doris?"

She trembled and looked behind her. She had not recognized his voice. Had another entered? Had

his brother dared—No, they were alone; seemingly so, that is. She knew—no one better—that they were not really alone, that witnesses were within hearing, if not within sight.

"Doris," he urged again, and this time she turned in his direction and gazed, aghast, at the voice, were strange, what of the face which now confronted her. The ravages of sickness had been marked, but they were nothing to those made in an instant by a blasting grief. She was startled, although expecting much, and could only press his hands while she waited for the question he was gathering strength to utter. It was simple when it came; just two words: "How long?"

"She answered them as simply: "Just as long as you have been ill, said she; then, with no attempt to break the inevitable shock, she went on: "Miss Challoner was struck dead and you were taken down with typhoid on the same day."

"Struck dead? Why do you use that word, struck? Struck dead? Is a young woman. Oh, Doris, an accident! My darling has been killed in an accident!"

"They do not call it accident. They call it what it never was. What it never was," she insisted, pressing him back with frightened hands, as he strove to rise. "Miss Challoner was—"

How nearly the word shot had left her lips. How fiercely above all else the desire to fling the accusation of that word into the ears of him who listened from his secret hiding place. She refrained out of compassion for the man she loved, and declared in stead, "Miss Challoner died from a wound; how given, why given, no one knows. I had rather have died myself than have to tell you this. Oh, Mr. Brotherson, speak, sob, do anything but—"

She started back, dropping his hands as she did so. With quick intuition she saw that he must be left to himself if he were to meet this blow without succumbing. The body must have freedom if the spirit would not go mad. Conscious, or perhaps not conscious, of his release from her restraining hand, albeit profiting by it, he staggered to his feet, murmuring that word of doom: "Wound! wound! my darling died of a wound! What kind of a wound?" he suddenly thundered out. "I cannot understand what you mean by wound. Make it clear to me. Make it clear to me at once. If I must bear this grief, let me know its whole depth. Leave nothing to my imagination or I cannot answer for myself. Tell it all, Doris!"

And Doris told him:

"She was on the mezzanine floor of the hotel where she lives. She was seemingly happy and had been writing a letter—a letter to me which they never forwarded. There was no one else by but some strangers—good people whom one must believe. She was crossing the floor when suddenly she threw up her hands and fell. A thin, narrow paper-cutter was in her grasp; and it flew into the lobby. Some say she struck herself with that cutter; for when they picked her up they found a wound in her breast which that cutter might have made."

"Edith? never!"

The words were chokingly said; he was swaying, almost falling, but he steadied himself.

"Who says that?" he asked.

"It was the coroner's verdict."

"And she died that way—died?"

"Immediately."

"After writing to you?"

"Yes."

"What was in the letter?"

"Nothing of threat, they say. Only just cheer and expressions of hope. Just like the others, Mr. Brotherson."

"And they accuse her of taking her own life? Their verdict is a lie. They did not know her." Then, after some moments of wild and confused feeling, he declared, with a desperate effort at self-control: "You said that some believe this. Then there must be others who do not. What do they say?"

"Nothing. They simply feel as you do. They see no reason for the act and no evidence of her having meditated it. Her father and her friends insist besides, that she was incapable of such a horror. The mystery of it is killing us all; me above others, for I've had to show you a cheerful face, with my brain reeling and my heart like lead in my bosom."

She held out her hands. She tried to draw his attention to herself; not from any sentiment of egotism, but to break, if she could, the strain of these insupportable horrors where so short a time before hope sang and life revealed in reawakened joys.

Perhaps some faint realization of this reached him, for presently he caught her by the hands and bowed his head upon her shoulder and finally let her seat him again, before he said: "Do they know of—of my interest in this?"

"Yes; they know about the two O. B.'s."

"The two—" He was on his feet again, but only for a moment; his weakness was greater than his will to power.

"Orlando and Oswald Brotherson," she explained, in answer to his broken appeal. "Your brother wrote letters to her as well as you, and signed them just as you did, with his initials only. These letters were found in her desk, and he was supposed, for a time, to have been the author of all that were so signed. But they found out the difference after awhile. Yours were easily recognized after they learned there was another O. B. who loved her."

The words were plain enough, but the stricken listener did not take them in. They carried no meaning to him. How could they? The very idea she sought to impress upon him by this seemingly careless allusion was an incredible one. She found it her dreadful task to tell him the hard, bare truth.

"Your brother," she said, "was devoted to Miss Challoner, too. He even wanted to marry her. I cannot keep back this fact. It is known everywhere, and by everybody but you."

"Orlando?" His lips took an ironical curve, as he uttered the word. "This was a young girl's imaginative fancy to him. Why Orlando never knew her, never saw her, never—"

"He met her at Lenox."

The name produced its effect. He stared, made an effort to think, recalled Lenox over to himself; then suddenly lost his hold upon the idea which that word suggested, struggled again for it, seized it in an instant of madness and shouted out:

"Yes, yes, I remember. I met him there—" and paused, his mind blank again.

Poor Doris, frightened to her very soul, looked blindly about for help, but she did not quit his side; she did not dare to, for his lips had reopened, the continuity of his thoughts had returned; he was going to speak.

"I sent him there." The words came in a sort of shout. "I was so hungry to hear of her and I thought he might mention her in his letter. Insane! Insane! He saw her and—"

What's that you said about his loving her? He couldn't have loved her, he's not of the loving sort. They've deceived you with strange tales. They've deceived the whole world with fancies and mad dreams. He may have admired her, but loved her—no; or if he had, he would have respected my claims."

"He did not know them."

A laugh; a laugh which paled Doris' cheeks, then his tones grew even again, memory came back and he muttered faintly:

"That is true. I said nothing to him. He had the right to court her—and he did, you say; wrote to her; imposed himself upon her, drove her mad with importunities she was forced to rebuke; and—and what else? There is something else. Tell me; I will know all."

He was standing now, his feet on all fours, passion in every lineament and his eye alive and feverish with emotion. "Tell me," he repeated, with unrestrained vehemence. "Tell me all. Kill me with sorrow but save me from being unjust."

"He wrote her a letter; it frightened her. He followed it up by a visit—"

Doris paused; the sentence hung suspended. She had heard a step—a hand on the door.

Orlando had entered the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Alone.

Oswald had heard nothing, seen nothing. But he took note of Doris' silence, and turning towards her in frenzy saw what had happened, and so was in a measure prepared for the stern, short sentence which now rang through the room:

"Wait, Miss Scott! you tell my story badly. Let him listen to me from my mouth only shall he hear the stern and seemingly unnatural part I played in this family tragedy."

The face of Oswald hardened. Those plant features—beloved for their gracious kindness—set themselves in lines which altered them almost beyond recognition; but his voice was not without some of its natural sweetness, as, after a long and hollow look at the other's composed countenance, he abruptly exclaimed:

"Walt, Miss Scott! you tell my story badly. Let him listen to me from my mouth only shall he hear the stern and seemingly unnatural part I played in this family tragedy."

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