

The House of the Whispering Pines

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

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(CONTINUED.)

"What would relieve my doubts? As Herford drew near me again on our way to the head of the staircase I summoned up courage to ask:

"Have you heard anything from the hill? Has the news of this tragedy been communicated to Miss Cumberland's family, and, if so, how are they bearing this affliction?"

His lip curled, and for a minute he hesitated; then something in my aspect or the straightforward look I gave him softened him, and he answered frankly, if coldly:

"Word has gone there, of course, but only the servants are affected by it so far. Miss Cumberland, the younger, is very ill, and the boy—I don't know his name—has not shown up since last evening. He's very dissipated, they say, and may be in any one of the joints in the lower part of the town."

I stopped in dismay, clutching wildly at the railing of the stairs we were descending. I had hardly heard the latter words. All my mind was on what he had said first.

"Miss Carmel Cumberland ill," I stammered, "too ill to be told?"

I was sufficiently master of myself to put it this way.

"Yes," he rejoined kindly as he urged me down the very stairs I had seen her descend in such a state of mind a few hours before.

"A servant who had been out late heard the fall of some heavy body as she was passing Miss Cumberland's rooms and, rushing in, found Miss Carmel, as she called her, lying on the floor near the open fire. Her face had struck the bars of the grate in falling, and she was badly burned. But that was not all. She was delirious with fever, brought on, they think, by anxiety about her sister, whose name she was constantly repeating. They had a doctor for her, and the whole house was up before ever the word came of what had happened here."

I thanked him with a look. I had no opportunity for more. Half a dozen officers were standing about the front door, and in another moment I was hustled into the conveyance provided and was being driven away from the death haunted spot.

As the day advanced and I began to realize that I, Elwood Ranelagh, easy going man of the world, but with traditions of respectable living on both sides of my house and a list of friends of whom any man might be proud, was in a place of detention on the awful charge of murder I found that my keenest torment arose from the fact that I was shut off from the instant knowledge of what was going on in the house where all my thoughts, my fears and—shall I say it?—latent hopes were centered. To know Carmel ill and not to know how ill; to feel the threatening arm of the law hovering constantly over her head and neither to know the instant of its fall nor be given the least opportunity to divert it!

My examination before the magistrate held one element of comfort. Nothing in its whole tenor went to show that as yet she was in the least suspected of any participation in my so called crime. But the knowledge which came later of how the police first learned of trouble at the clubhouse did not add to this sense of relief, whatever satisfaction it gave my curiosity. A cry of distress had come to them over the telephone, a wild cry in a woman's choked and tremulous voice: "Help at the Whispering Pines! Help!" That was all, or all they revealed to me. In their endeavor to find out whether or not I was present when this call was made I learned the nature of their own suspicions. They believed that Adelaide in some moment of prevision had managed to reach the telephone and send out this message.

It was in a condition of mingled dread and expectation that I opened the paper which was brought me the next morning. Arthur, the good-for-nothing brother, had returned from his wild carouse and had taken affairs in charge with something like spirit and a decent show of repentance for his own shortcomings and the mad taste for liquor which had led him away from home that night. Carmel was still ill and likely to be so for many days to come. Her case was diagnosed as one of brain fever and of a most dangerous type. Doctors and nurses were busy at her bedside, and little hope was held out of her being able to tell soon, if ever, what she knew of her sister's departure from the house on that fatal evening. That her testimony on this point would be invaluable was self evident, for proofs were plenty of her having haunted her sister's rooms all the evening in a condition of more or less delirium. She

was alone in the house, and this may have added to her anxiety, all of the servants having gone to the policeman's ball. It was on their return in the early morning hours that she had been discovered lying ill and injured before her sister's fireplace.

One fact was mentioned which set me thinking. The keys of the clubhouse had been found lying on a table in the side hall of the Cumberland mansion—the keys which I have already mentioned as missing from my pocket—an alarming discovery which might have acted as a clue to the suspicious I feared if their presence there had not been explained by the waitress who had cleared the table after dinner. Coming upon these keys lying on the floor beside one of the chairs, she had carried them out into the hall and laid them where they would be more readily seen. She had not recognized the keys, but had taken it for granted that they belonged to Mr. Ranelagh, who had dined at the house that night.

They were my keys, and I have already related how I came to drop them on the floor. Had they but stayed there! Adelaide, or was it Carmel, might not have seen them and been led by some strange if not tragic purpose, incomprehensible to us now and possibly never to find full explanation, to enter the secret and forsaken spot where I later found them, the one dead, the other fleeing in frenzy, but not in such a thoughtless frenzy as to forget these keys or to fail to lock the clubhouse door behind her. That she on her return home should have had sufficient presence of mind to toss these keys down in the same place from which she or her sister had taken them argued well for her clear headedness up to that moment. The fever must have come on later.

The next paragraph detailed a fact startling enough to rouse my deepest interest. Zadok Brown, the Cumberland's coachman, declared that Arthur's cutter and what he called the gray mare had been out that night. They were both in place when he returned to the stable toward early morning, but the signs were unmistakable that both had been out in the snow since he left the stable at about 9. He had locked the stable door at that time, but the key always hung in the kitchen where any one could get it. This was on account of Arthur, who, if he wanted to go out late, sometimes harnessed a horse himself. Zadok judged that he had done so this night, though how the horse happened to be back and in her stall and no Mr. Arthur in the house it would take wiser heads than his to explain.

There was some comment made on this because Arthur had denied using his cutter that night. He declared instead that he had gone out on foot and designated the coachman's tale as all bosh.

As for myself, I felt inclined to believe that the mare had been out, that one or both of the women had harnessed her and that it was by these means they had reached the Whispering Pines. Adelaide was far from strong and never addicted to walking under the most favorable conditions. I could understand now how Carmel had succeeded in returning in safety to her home. She had ridden both ways—a theory which likewise explained how she came to wear a man's derby and possibly a man's overcoat. With her skirts covered by a bearskin she would present a very fair figure of a man to any one who chanced to pass her.

These were my deductions drawn from my own knowledge. Would others who had not my knowledge be in anywise influenced to draw the same? Yet, if they let this point slip, where should I be? Human nature is human all the way through, and I could not help having moments when I asked myself if this young girl were worth the sacrifice I contemplated making for her. She was lovely to look at, amiable and of womanly promise save at those rare and poignant moments when passion would seize her in a gust which drove everything before it. That she had had provocation I did not doubt. Adelaide, for all her virtues, was not an easy person to deal with. Upright and perfectly sincere herself, she had no sympathy with or consideration for any lack of principle or any display of selfishness in others. She was a little cold, a little reserved, a little lacking in spontaneity, though always correct and always generous in her gifts and often in her acts.

CHAPTER V.

"I AM AN INNOCENT MAN."

I STRUGGLED with my dilemma for hours. I had relatives and I had friends, some of whom had come to see me and gone away deeply grieved at my reticence. I was swayed, too, by another consideration. I had deeply loved my mother. She was dead, but I had her honor to think of. Should it be said she had a murderer for her son? In the height of my inner conflict I had almost cried aloud the fierce denial which would arise at this thought. But ere the word could leave my lips such a vision rose before me of a bewildering young face with wonderful eyes and a smile too innocent for guile and too loving for hypocrisy that I forgot my late antagonistic feelings, forgot the claims of my dear, dead mother and even those of my own future. Such passion and such devotion merited consideration from

the man who had called them forth. I would not slight the claims of my dead mother, but I would give this young girl a chance for her life. Let others ferret out the fact that she had visited the clubhouse with her sister; I would not proclaim it. It was enough for me to proclaim my innocence.

I was in this frame of mind when Charles Clifton called and was allowed to see me. I had sent for him in one of my discouraged moods. He was my friend, but he was also my legal adviser, and it was as such I had summoned him, and it was as such he had now come. Cordial as our relations had been, I noted no instinctive outstretching of his hand and so did not reach out mine. I was the first to speak.

"I am an innocent man so far as the attack made upon Miss Cumberland goes. I had no hand in her murder, if murder it is found out to be. My story which you have read in the papers and which I felt forced to give out, possibly to my own shame and that of another whom I would fain have saved, is an absolutely true one. I did not arrive at the Whispering Pines until after Miss Cumberland was dead. To this I am ready to swear, and it is upon this fact you must rely in any defense you may hereafter be called upon to make in my regard."

But I saw that I had made no impression on his convictions. He regarded me as a guilty man and, what was more to the point no doubt, as one for whom no plea could be made or any rational defense undertaken.

"You don't believe me," I went on, still without any great bitterness. "I am not surprised at it after what the man Clarke has said of seeing me with my hands on her throat. But, Charles, to you I will confess that I did this out of a wild desire to see if those marks were really the marks of strangling fingers. You shall believe me—you must." I insisted as I perceived his hard gaze remain unsoftened. "I don't ask it of the rest of the world. But you, if you are to act as my counsel, must take this denial from me as gospel truth. She was dead before I touched her. Had the police spy whose testimony is likely to hang me climbed the tree a moment sooner than he did he would have seen that. Are you ready to take my case?"

Clifton is a fair fellow, and I knew if he once accepted the fact I thus urged upon him he would work for me with all the skill and ability my desperate situation demanded. I was conscious of a great leap of heart as the set expression of his features relaxed and he responded almost warmly:

"I will take your case, Ranelagh. God help me to make it good against all odds."

I was conscious of few hopes, but some of the oppression under which I labored lifted at those words. I had assured one man of my innocence! He was ready to speak before I was. "Then you had not been long on the scene of crime when the police arrived?"

"I had been in the room but a few minutes. I do not know how long I was searching the house."

"The police say that fully twenty minutes elapsed between the time they received Miss Cumberland's appeal for help and their arrival at the clubhouse. If you were there that long—"

"I cannot say. Moments are hours at such a crisis. I"—

My emotions were too much for me, and I confusedly stopped. He was surveying me with the old distrust. In a moment I saw why.

"You are not open with me," he protested. "Why should moments be hours to you previous to the instant when you stripped those pillows from the couch?"

This was a poser. I had laid myself open to suspicion by one thoughtless admission, and, what was worse, it was but the beginning in all probability of many other possible mistakes. I had never taken the trouble to measure my words, and the whole truth being impossible, I necessarily must make a slip now and then. I did not wish him to undertake my cause blindfolded. He must understand its difficulties while believing in my innocence. Then if he chose to draw back well and good. I should have to face the situation alone.

"Charles," said I as soon as I could perfectly control my speech, "you are quite just in your remark. I am not and cannot be perfectly open with you. I shall tell you no lies, but beyond that I cannot promise. I am caught in a net not altogether of my own weaving. So far I will be frank with you. A common question may trip me up. Others find me free and ready with my defense. You have chanced upon one of the former. I was in a turmoil of mind from the moment of my entrance into that fatal house, but I can give no reason for it."

"You say you cannot be open with me. That means you have certain memories connected with that night which you cannot divulge."

"Right, Charles, but not memories of guilt—of active guilt, I mean. I am perfectly innocent so far as Adelaide's death is concerned. You may proceed on that basis without fear—that is, if you continue to take an interest in my case."

"I have accepted the case, and I shall continue to interest myself in it," he assured me, with a dogged rather than genial persistence. "But I should like to know what I am to work upon if it cannot be shown that her call for help came before you entered the building."

"That would be the best defense possible, of course," I replied, "but neither from your standpoint nor mine is it a feasible one. I have no proof of my assertion. All I know and can swear to about the length of time I was in that building prior to the arrival of the police is that it could not

have been very long, since she was not only dead and buried under those accumulated cushions, but in a room some little distance from the telephone."

"That will do for me," said he, "but scarcely for those who are prejudiced against you. Everything points so indisputably to your guilt. The note which you say you wrote to Carmel to meet you at the station looks very much more like one to Miss Cumberland to meet you at the clubhouse."

It was thus I first learned which part of this letter had been burned off. It was the top portion, leaving the rest to read:

"Come, come, my darling, my life! She will forgive when all is done. Hesitation will only undo us. Tonight at 10:30 I shall never marry any but you."

It was also evident that I had failed to add those expressions of affection linked to Carmel's name which had been in my mind and awakened my keenest apprehension.

"Otherwise," pursued Clifton, "what could have taken her there? These lines said 'Come!' and she went, for reasons which may be clear to you, who were acquainted with her weak as well as strong points. Went how? No one knows. By chance or by intention on her part or yours, every servant was out of the house by 9 o'clock, and her brother too. Only the sister remained, the sister whom you profess to have urged to leave the town with you that very evening, and she can tell us nothing—may die without ever being able to do so. Some shock to her feelings—you may know his character and you may not—drove her from a state of apparent health into the wildest delirium in a few hours. It was not your letter—if your story is true about that letter—or she would have shown its effect immediately upon receiving it—that is, in the early evening. And she did not. Helen, one of the maids, declares that she saw her some time after you left the house and that she wore anything but a troubled look; that, in fact, her countenance was beaming and beautiful."

Carmel, beaming and beautiful at an hour I had supposed her suffering and full of struggle! I could not reconcile it with the letter she had written me. The lawyer proceeded with his presentation of my case as it looked to unprejudiced eyes.

"Miss Cumberland comes to the clubhouse; so do you. You have not the keys and so go searching about the building till you find an unlocked window, by which you both enter. There are those who say you purposely left this window unfastened when you went about the house the day before; that you dropped the keys in her house where they would be sure to be found and drove down to the station and stood about there for a good half hour in order to divert suspicion from yourself afterward and create an alibi in case it should be wanted. I do not believe any of this myself, but there are those who do. Your passion for Carmel, while not generally known, has not passed unsuspected by your or her intimates, and this in itself is enough to give color to these suspicions even if you had not gone so far as to admit its power over you and the extremes to which you were willing to go to secure the wife you wished. So much for the situation as it appears to outsiders. Of the circumstantial evidence which links you personally to this crime we have already spoken. It is very strong and apparently unassailable."

"Charles," I asked, "how do they account for the cordial that was drunk—the two emptied glasses and the flask which were found in the adjacent closet?"

"It's one of the affair's conceded incongruities. Miss Cumberland was a well known temperance woman. Had the flask and glasses not come from her house you would get no one to believe that she had had anything to do with them. Have you any hint to give on this point? It would be a welcome addition to our case."

"Coroner Perry speaks of a third and unused glass which was found with the flask," I ventured tentatively. "He seemed to consider it an important item."

"It is a curious circumstance. I will make a note of it. You have no suggestions to offer on the subject?"

"None."

"The clue is a small one," he smiled. "So is the one offered by the array of bottles found on the kitchen table, yet the latter may lead directly to the truth. Adelaide never dug those out of the cellar where they were locked up, and I'm sure I did not. Yet I suppose I'm given credit for doing so."

"Naturally. The key to the wine vault was the only key which was lacking from the bunch left at Miss Cumberland's. That it was used to open the wine vault door is evident from the fact that it was found in the lock."

"You may add this coincidence to the other," I conceded. "I swear that I had nothing to do with that key."

Neither could I believe that it had been used or even carried there by Adelaide or Carmel, though I knew that the full ring of keys had been in their hands and that they had entered the building by means of one of them. So assured was I of their innocence in this regard that the idea which afterward assumed such proportions in all our minds had at this moment its first dawning in mine as well as its first outward expression.

"Some other man than myself was thirsty that night," I firmly declared. "We are getting on, Charles."

Evidently he did not consider the pace a very fast one; but, being a cheerful fellow by nature, he simply expressed his dissatisfaction by an imperceptible shrug.

"Do you know exactly what the clubhouse's wine vault contained?" he asked.

"An inventory was given me by the steward the morning we closed. It must be in my rooms."

"Your rooms have been examined. You expected that, didn't you? Probably this inventory has been found. I don't suppose it will help any."

"I will see you tomorrow—any time tomorrow," I said. "Meantime I will give you a commission which you are at liberty to perform yourself or to intrust to some capable detective. The letter, of which a portion remains, was written to Carmel, and she sent me a reply, which was handed me on the station platform by a man who was a perfect stranger to me. I have hardly any memory of how the man looked, but it should be an easy task to find him, and if you cannot do that the smallest scrap of the note he gave me and which unfortunately I tore up and scattered to the winds would prove my veracity in this one particular and so make it easier for them to believe the rest."

His eye lightened. I presume the prospect of making any practical attempt in my behalf was welcome.

"One thing more," I now added. "My ring was missing from Miss Cumberland's hand when I took away those pillows. I have reason to think—or it is natural for me to think—that she planned to return it to me by some messenger or in some letter. Do you know if such messenger or such letter has been received at my apartments? Have you heard anything about this ring? It was a notable one and not to be confounded with any other. Any one who knew us or who had ever remarked it on her hand would be able to identify it."

"I have heard the ring mentioned," he replied. "I have even heard that

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THERE WAS A SLIGHT PRESSURE.

the police are interested in finding it, but I have not heard that they have been successful. You encourage me much by assuring me that it was missing from her hand when you first saw her. That ring may prove our most valuable clue."

"Yes, but you must also remember that she may have taken it off before she started for the clubhouse."

"That is very true."

"You do not know whether they have looked for it at her home?"

"I do not. I will take good care of your interests from now on. Be hopeful and show a brave front to the district attorney when he comes to interview you. I hear that he is expected home tomorrow. If you are innocent you can face him and his whole office with calm assurance."

"You are free," said I. "I am not. Miss Cumberland will be buried before I leave these four walls. I hate to think of her going to her grave without one token from the man to whom she has been only too good. Charles, a few flowers, white, no wreath, just a few which can be placed on her breast or in her hand. You need not say whom they are from. It would seem a mockery to any one but her. Lilies, Charles. I shall feel happier to know that they are there. Will you do this for me?"

"I will."

"That is all."

Instinctively he held out his hand. I dropped mine in it, there was a slight pressure, some few more murmured words, and he was gone. I slept that night.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHANCE! I TAKE IT.

I SLEPT, though a question of no small importance was agitating my mind, demanding instant consideration and a definite answer before I again saw Clifton. This was my plan. I would acknowledge to having seen a horse and cutter leave the clubhouse by the upper gateway simultaneously with my entrance through the lower one. I would even describe the appearance of the person driving this cutter. No one by the greatest stretch of imagination would be apt to associate this description with Carmel, but it might set the authorities thinking, and if by any good chance a cutter containing a person wearing a derby hat and a coat with an extra high collar should have been seen on this portion of the road, or if, as I earnestly hoped, the snow had left any signs of another horse having been tethered in the clump of trees opposite the one where I had concealed my own, enough of the truth might be furnished to divide public opinion and start fresh inquiry.

That a woman's form had sought concealment under these masculine habiliments would not, could not,

strike anybody's mind. Nothing in the crime had suggested a woman's presence, much less a woman's active agency.

The suspicion which had naturally fallen on myself as the one and only person implicated would in shifting pass straight to another man and, if he could not be found, return to me or be lost in a mass of speculation. I was ready with my confession when Mr. Clifton next came. I had even forestalled it in a short interview forced upon me by the assistant district attorney and Chief Hudson. That it seemed to have made a more favorable impression upon the latter than I had expected gave me additional courage when I came to discuss this new line of defense with the young lawyer.

"I have heard of no new discovery," he said. "If another cutter besides yours passed through the clubhouse grounds at the time you mention it left tracks which all the fury of the storm would not have entirely obliterated in the fifteen minutes elapsing between that time and the arrival of the police."

"But a witness can certainly be found who encountered that cutter and its occupants somewhere on the long stretch of open road between the Whispering Pines and the residence district," I said.

"Possibly. It would help. You have not asked for news from the Hill."

"Carmel!" I cried. "She is worse—dead!"

"No. She's not worse and she's not dead. But the doctors say it will be weeks before they can allow a question of any importance to be put to her. You can see what that will do for us. Her testimony is too important to the case to be ignored. A delay will follow, which may or may not be favorable to you. I am inclined to think now that it will redound to your interests. You are ready to swear to the sleigh you speak of—that you saw it leave the clubhouse grounds and turn north?"

"Quite ready, but you must not ask me to describe or in any way to identify its occupants. I saw nothing but the hat and coat I have told you about. It was just before the moon went under a cloud or I could not have seen that much."

I suppose my voice fell, for his glance became suddenly penetrating and his voice slightly sarcastic as he remarked:

"Those clouds obscured more than the moon, I fancy. I only wish that they had not risen between you and me. This is the blindest case that has ever been put in my hands."

"Tell me," I broke in, "of Carmel's condition, of the sort of nurse who cares for her and how Arthur conducts himself under this double affliction."

"I was there last night. Miss Clifton was in the house and received me. She told me that Arthur's state of mind was pitiful. He was never a very affectionate brother, you know, but now they cannot get him away from Carmel's door. He sits or stands all day just outside the threshold and casts jealous and beseeching looks at those who are allowed to enter."

"Doesn't he grieve for Adelaide? I always thought that of the two she had the greater influence over him."

"Yes, but they cannot get him to enter the place where she lies. His duty is to the living, he says. At least his anxiety is there. He starts at every cry Carmel utters of 'Lila—Lila! Nothing more!'"

"Does he—Arthur—mention me at all?"

"Arthur feels very hard toward you and insists upon your guilt."

"Does the doctor—Dr. Carpenter. I presume—venture to say how long Carmel's present delirium will hold?"

"He cannot, not knowing its real cause. Carmel fell ill before the news of her sister's death arrived at the house, you remember. Some frightful scene must have occurred between the two previous to Adelaide's departure for the Whispering Pines. What that scene was can only be told by Carmel, and for her account we must wait. Happily you have an alibi which will serve you in this instance. You were at the station during the time we are speaking of."

"Has that been proved?"

"Yes; several men saw you there."

"And the gentleman who brought me the letter?" It was more than difficult for me to speak Carmel's name. "He has not come forward?"

Thirty Years Together.

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"I WILL TAKE YOUR CASE."

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