

The Woman In the Alcove.

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CHAPTER X.

I WAS not the only one to tremble now. This man of infinite experience and daily contact with crime had turned as pale as ever I myself had done in face of a threatening calamity.

"I shall see about this," he muttered, crumpling the paper in his hand. "But this is a very terrible business you are plunging me into. I sincerely hope that you are not heedlessly misleading me."

"I am correct in my facts, if that is what you mean," said I. "The stiletto is an English heirloom and bears on its blade, among other devices, that of Mr. Grey's family on the female side. But that is not all I want to say. If the blow was struck to obtain the diamond, the shock of not finding it on his victim must have been terrible. Now, Mr. Grey's heart, if my whole theory is not utterly false, was set upon obtaining this stone. Your eye was not on him as mine was when you made your appearance in the hall with the recovered jewel. He showed astonishment, eagerness and a determination which finally led him forward as you know with the request to take the diamond in his hand. Why did he want to take it in his hand? And why, having taken it, did he drop it—a diamond supposed to be worth an ordinary man's fortune? Because he was startled by a cry he chose to consider the traditional one of his family proclaiming death? Is it likely, sir? Is it conceivable even that any such cry as we heard could, in this day and generation, ring through such an assemblage, unless it came with ventriloquial power from his own lips? You observed that he turned his back; that his face was hidden from us. Discreet and reticent as we have all been and careful in our criticisms of so bizarre an event, there still must be many to question the reality of such superstitious fears and some to ask if such a sound could be without human agency and a very guilty agency too. Inspector, I am but a child in your estimation, and I feel my position in this matter much more keenly than you do, but I would not be true to the man whom I have unwittingly helped to place in his present unenviable position if I did not tell you that in my judgment this cry was a spurious one, employed by the gentleman himself as an excuse for dropping the stone."

"And why should he wish to drop the stone?"

"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 improbable he ever saw? You would make him out a Cagliostro 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 Mrs. Fairbrother wore on entering the alcove. Besides, where all is sensation, why cavil at one more improbability? Mr. Grey may have come over 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 impetuously 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 your friend declare Miss Grey to have written with a pencil and on a small piece of unruled 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 envelope, 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? Has she that book?"

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

The Inspector turned the morsel of paper over and over in his hand.

"What is this nurse's name?"

"Henrietta Pierson."

"Does she share your doubts?"

"I cannot say."

"You have seen her often?"

"No, only the one time."

"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 ill founded, sir."

Slowly the Inspector inserted this scrap of paper between the folds of his pocketbook. He did not give me another look, though 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 an agent of crime other than one of England's most reputable statesmen."

"So that Mr. Durand is shown the same consideration, 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 on this scene, I do not wonder that he shrank 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, I must admit, 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 eccentric man, that's all."

"But—but—"

"I shall do my duty. I shall 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."

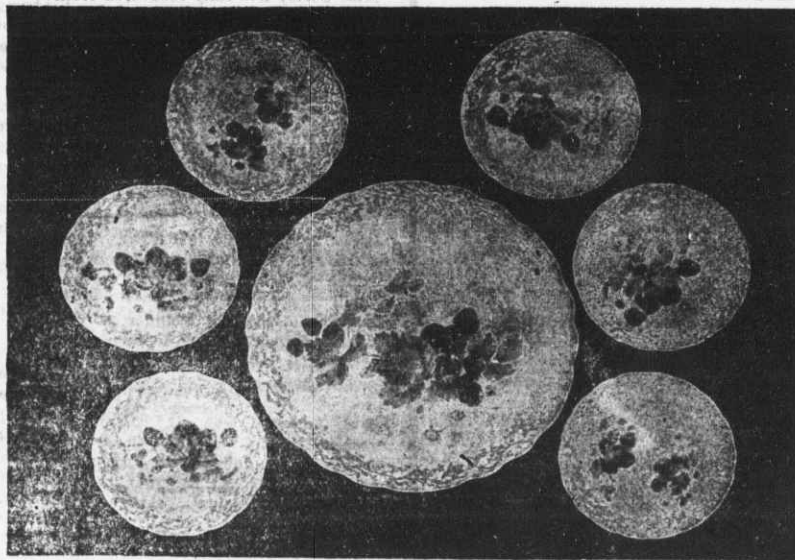
And with this half hearted encouragement I was forced to be content not only for that day, but for many days, when—

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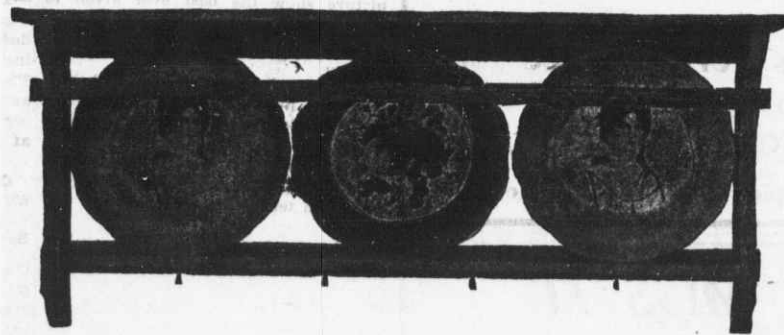
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