

# GREEN ANNA KATHARINE

THE HERMIT OF. ... STREET

Anna Green

**The Hermit Of. ... Street**

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# Anna Katharine Green

## The Hermit Of – Street / 1898

### CHAPTER I. I COMMIT AN INDISCRETION

I should have kept my eyes for the many brilliant and interesting sights constantly offered me. Another girl would have done so. I myself might have done so, had I been over eighteen, or, had I not come from the country, where my natural love of romance had been fostered by uncongenial surroundings and a repressed life under the eyes of a severe and unsympathetic maiden aunt.

I was visiting in a house where fashionable people made life a perpetual holiday. Yet of all the pleasures which followed so rapidly, one upon another, that I have difficulty now in separating them into distinct impressions, the greatest, the only one I never confounded with any other, was the hour I spent in my window after the day's dissipations were all over, watching—what? Truth and the necessities of my story oblige me to say—a man's face, a man's handsome but preoccupied face, bending night after night over a study-table in the lower room of the great house in our rear.

I had been in the city three weeks, and I had already received—pardon the seeming egotism of the confession—four offers, which, considering I had no fortune and but little education or knowledge of the great world, speaks well for something: I leave you to judge what. All of these offers were from young men; one of them from a very desirable young man, but I had listened to no one's addresses, because, after accepting them, I should have felt it wrong to contemplate so unremittingly the face, which, for all its unconsciousness of myself, held me spell-bound to an idea I neither stopped nor cared to analyze.

Why, at such a distance and under circumstances of such distraction, did it affect me so? It was not a young face (Mr. Allison at that time was thirty-five); neither was it a cheerful or even a satisfied one; but it was very handsome, as I have said; far too handsome, indeed, for a romantic girl to see unmoved, and it was an enigmatic face; one that did not lend itself to immediate comprehension, and that, to one of my temperament, was a fatal attraction, especially as enough was known of his more than peculiar habits to assure me that character, rather than whim, lay back of his eccentricities.

But first let me explain more fully my exact position in regard to this gentleman on that day in early spring, destined to be such a memorable one in my history.

I had never seen him, save in the surreptitious way I have related, and he had never seen me. The day following my arrival in the city I had noticed the large house in our rear, and had asked some questions about it. This was but natural, for it was one of the few mansions in the great city with an old-style lawn about it. Besides, it had a peculiarly secluded and secretive look, which even to my unaccustomed eyes, gave it an appearance strangely out of keeping with the expensive but otherwise ordinary houses visible in all other directions. The windows—and there were many—were all shuttered and closed, with the exception of the three on the lower floor and two others directly over these. On the top story they were even boarded up, giving to that portion of the house a blank and desolate air, matched, I was told, by that of the large drawing-room windows on either side of the front door, which faced, as you must see, on another street.

The grounds which, were more or less carefully looked after, were separated from the street by a brick wall, surmounted by urns, from which drooped the leafless tendrils of some old vines; but in the rear, that is, in our direction, the line of separation was marked by a high iron fence, in which, to my surprise, I saw a gate, which, though padlocked now, marked old habits of intercourse, interesting to contemplate, between the two houses. Through this fence I caught glimpses of the green turf and scattered shrubs of a yard which had once sloped away to the avenues on either side, and,

more interesting still, those three windows whose high-drawn shades offered such a vivid contrast to the rest of the house.

In one of these windows stood a table, with a chair before it. I had as yet seen no one in the chair, but I had noted that the table was heavily covered with papers and books, and judged that the room was a library and the table that of a busy man engaged in an endless amount of study and writing.

The Vandykes, whom I had questioned on the matter, were very short in their replies. Not because the subject was uninteresting, or one they in any way sought to avoid, but because the invitations to a great party had just come in, and no other topic was worthy their discussion. But I learned this much. That the house belonged to one of New York's oldest families. That its present owner was a widow of great eccentricity of character, who, with her one child, a daughter, unfortunately blind from birth, had taken up her abode in some foreign country, where she thought her child's affliction would attract less attention than in her native city. The house had been closed to the extent I have mentioned, immediately upon her departure, but had not been left entirely empty. Mr. Allison, her man of business, had moved into it, and, being fully as eccentric as herself, had contented himself for five years with a solitary life in this dismal mansion, without friends, almost without acquaintances, though he might have had unlimited society and any amount of attention, his personal attractions being of a very uncommon order, and his talent for business so pronounced, that he was already recognized at thirty-five as one of the men to be afraid of in Wall Street. Of his birth and connections little was known; he was called the Hermit of – Street, and—well, that is about all they told me at this time.

After I came to see him (as I did that very evening), I could ask no further questions concerning him. The beauty of his countenance, the mystery of his secluded life, the air of melancholy and mental distress which I imagined myself to detect in his manner—he often used to sit for minutes together with his eyes fixed on vacancy and his whole face expressive of the bitterest emotion—had wrought this spell upon my imagination, and I could no more mingle his name with that of the ordinary men and women we discussed than I could confound his solitary and expressive figure with the very proper but conventional forms of the simpering youths who followed me in parlors or begged to be allowed the honor of a dance at the balls I attended with the Vandykes. He occupied an unique place in my regard, and this without another human being's knowledge. I wish I could say without my own; but, alas! I have promised myself to be true in all the details of this history, and, child as I was, I could not be ignorant of the fascination which held me for hours at my window when I should have been in bed and asleep.

But let me hasten to the adventure which put an end to my dreams by launching me into realities of a still more absorbing nature. I was not very well one day, and even Mrs. Vandyke acknowledged that it would not do for me to take the long-planned drive to Tuxedo. So, as I would not let any one else miss this pleasure on my account, I had been left alone in the house, and, not being ill enough for bed, had spent the most of the morning in my window—not because he was in his; I was yet too timid, and, let me hope, too girlishly modest, to wish to attract in any way his attention—but because the sun shone there, and I was just chilly enough to enjoy its mingled light and heat. Thus it was I came to notice the following petty occurrence. In the yard of the house next to that occupied by Mr. Allison was kept a tame rabbit, which often took advantage of a hole it had made for itself under the dividing fence to roam over the neighboring lawn. On this day he was taking his accustomed ramble, when something startled him, and he ran, not back to his hole, but to our fence, through which he squeezed himself, evidently to his own great discomfort; for once in our yard, and under the refuge of a small bush he found there, nothing would lure him back, though every effort was made to do so, both by the small boy to whom he belonged, and the old serving-man or gardener, who was the only other person besides Mr. Allison whom I ever saw on the great place. Watching them, I noted three things: first, that it was the child who first thought of opening the gate; secondly, that it was the serving-man who brought the key; and, thirdly, that after the gate had been opened and

the rabbit recovered, the gate had not been locked again; for, just as the man was about to do this, a call came from the front, of so imperative a nature, that he ran forward, without readjusting the padlock, and did not come back, though I watched for him in idle curiosity for a good half-hour. This was in the morning. At seven o'clock—how well I remember the hour!—I was sitting again in my window, waiting for the return of the Vandykes, and watching the face which had now reappeared at its usual place in the study. It was dark everywhere save there, and I was marveling over the sense of companionship it gave me under circumstances of loneliness, which some girls might have felt most keenly, when suddenly my attention was drawn from him to a window in the story over his head, by the rapid blowing in and out of a curtain, which had been left hanging loose before an open sash. As there was a lighted gas-jet near by, I watched the gyrating muslin with some apprehension, and was more shocked than astonished when, in another moment, I saw the flimsy folds give one wild flap and flare up into a brilliant and dangerous flame. To shriek and throw up my window was the work of a moment, but I attracted no attention by these means, and, what was worse, saw, with feelings which may be imagined, that nothing I could do would be likely to arouse Mr. Allison to an immediate sense of his danger, for not only were the windows shut between us, but he was lost in one of his brooding spells, which to all appearance made him quite impassible to surrounding events.

“Will no one see? Will no one warn him?” I cried out, in terror of the flames burning so brightly in the room above him. Seemingly not. No other window was raised in the vicinity, and, frightened quite beyond the exercise of reason or any instincts of false modesty, I dashed out of my room downstairs, calling for the servants. But Lucy was in the front area and Ellen above, and I was on the back porch and in the garden before either of them responded.

Meanwhile, no movement was observable in the brooding figure of Mr. Allison, and no diminution in the red glare which now filled the room above him. To see him sitting there so much at his ease, and to behold at the same moment the destruction going on so rapidly over his head, affected me more than I can tell, and casting to the winds all selfish considerations, I sprang through the gate so providentially left ajar and knocked with all my might on a door which opened upon a side porch not many feet away from the spot where he sat so unconcernedly.

The moment I had done this I felt like running away again, but hearing his advancing step, summoned up my courage and stood my ground bravely, determined to say one word and run.

But when the door opened and I found myself face to face with the man whose face I knew only too well, that word, important as it was, stuck in my throat; for, agitated as I was, both by my errand and my sudden encounter with one I had dreamed about for weeks, he seemed to be much more so, though by other reasons—by far other reasons—than myself. He was so moved—was it by the appearance of a strange young girl on his doorstep, or was it at something in my face or manner, or some-thing in his thoughts to which that face or manner gave a shock?—that my petty fears for the havoc going on above seemed to pale into insignificance before the emotions called up by my presence. Confronting me with dilating eyes, he faltered slowly back till his natural instincts of courtesy recalled him to himself, and he bowed, when I found courage to cry:

“Fire! Your house is on fire! Up there, overhead!”

The sound which left his lips as these words slipped from mine struck me speechless again. Appalling as the cry “Fire!” is at all times and to all men, it roused in this man at this time something beyond anything my girlish soul had ever imagined of terror or dismay. So intense were the feelings I saw aroused in him that I expected to see him rush into the open air with loud cries for help. But instead of that, he pushed the door to behind me, and locking me in, said, in a strange and hoarsened tone?

“Don’t call out, don’t make any sound or outcry, and above all, don’t let any one in; I will fight the flames alone!” and seizing a lamp from the study-table, he dashed from me towards a staircase I could faintly see in the distance. But half-way down the hall he looked back at me, and again I saw that look on his face which had greeted my unexpected appearance in the doorway.

Alas! it was a thrilling look—a look which no girl could sustain without emotion; and spellbound under it, I stood in a maze, alone and in utter darkness, not knowing whether to unlock the door and escape or to stand still and wait for his reappearance, as he evidently expected me to do.

Meanwhile, the alarm had spread, and more than one cry arose from the houses in the rear. I could hear feet running over the walks without, and finally a knock on the door I was leaning against, followed by the cry:

“Let us in! Fire! fire!”

But I neither moved nor answered. I was afraid to be found there, crouching alone in a bachelor’s residence, but I was equally afraid of disobeying him, for his voice had been very imperious when he commanded me not to let any one in; and I was too young to brave such a nature, even if I had wished to, which I do not think I did.

“He is overhead! See him—see him!” I now heard shouted from the lawn. “He has dragged the curtains down! He is showering the walls with water! Look—look! how wildly he works! He will be burnt himself. Ah! ah!” All of which gave me strange thrills, and filled the darkness which encompassed me with startling pictures, till I could hardly stand the stress or keep myself from rushing to his assistance.

While my emotions were at their height a bell rang. It was the front doorbell, and it meant the arrival of the engines.

“Oh!” thought I, “what shall I do now? If I run out I shall encounter half the neighborhood in the back yard; if I stay here how shall I be able to meet the faces of the firemen who will come rushing in?”

But I was not destined to suffer from either contingency. As the bell rang a second time, a light broke on the staircase I was so painfully watching, and Mr. Allison descended, lamp in hand, as he had gone up. He appeared calm now, and without any show of emotion proceeded at once to the front door, which he opened.

What passed between him and the policeman whose voice I heard in the hall, I do not know. I heard them go up-stairs and presently come down again, and I finally heard the front door close. Then I began to make an effort to gain some control over my emotions, for I knew he had not forgotten me, and that he soon would be in the vestibule at my side.

But it was impossible for me to hope to meet him with an unconcerned air. The excitement I was under and the cold—for I was dressed lightly and the vestibule was chilly—had kept me trembling so, that my curls had fallen all about my cheeks, and one had fallen so low that it hung in shameful disorder to my very waist. This alone was enough to disconcert me, but had my heart been without its secret—a secret I was in mortal terror of disclosing in my confusion—I could have risen above my embarrassment and let simple haste be my excuse. As it was, I must have met him with a pleading aspect, very much like that of a frightened child, for his countenance visibly changed as he approached me, and showed quite an extraordinary kindness, if not contrition, as he paused in the narrow vestibule with the blazing lamp held low in his hand.

“My little girl,” he began, but instantly changed the phrase to “My dear young lady, how can I thank you enough, and how can I sufficiently express my regret at having kept you a prisoner in this blazing house? I fear I have frightened you sorely, but—” And here, to my astonishment, he found nothing to say, moved overmuch by some strong feeling, or checked in his apologies by some great embarrassment.

Astonished, for he did not look like a man who could be lightly disturbed, I glowed a fiery red and put my hand out towards the door. Instantly he found speech again.

“One moment,” said he. “I feel that I ought to explain the surprise, the consternation, which made me forget. You know this is not my house, that I am here in trust for another, that the place is full of rare treasures.”

Had he stopped again? I was in such a state of inner perturbation that I hardly knew whether he had ceased to speak or I to hear. Something, I did not know what, had shaken my very life's center—something in the shape of dread, yet so mixed with delight that my hand fell from the knob I had been blindly groping for and sank heavily at my side. His eyes had not left my face.

“May I ask whom I have the honor of addressing?” he asked, in a tone I might better never have heard from his lips.

To this I must make reply. Shuddering, for I felt something uncanny in the situation, but speaking up, notwithstanding, with the round and vibrating tones I had inherited from my mother, I answered, with the necessary simplicity:

“I am Delight Hunter, a country girl, sir, visiting the Vandykes.”

A flash that was certainly one of pleasure lighted up his face with a brilliance fatal to my poor, quivering girl's heart.

“Allow me, Miss Hunter, to believe that you will not bring down the indignation of my neighbors upon me by telling them of my carelessness and indiscretion.” Then, as my lips settled into a determined curve, he himself opened the door, and bowing low, asked if I would accept his protection to the gate.

But at the rush of the night air, such a sensation of shame overpowered me that I only thought of retreat; and, declining his offer with a wild shake of the head, I dashed from the house and fled with an incomprehensible sense of relief back to that of the Vandykes. The servants, who had seen me rush towards Mr. Allison's, were still in the yard watching for me. I did not vouchsafe them a word. I could hardly formulate words in my own mind. A great love and a great dread had seized upon me at once. A great love for the man by whose face I had been moved for weeks and a great dread—well, I cannot explain my dread, not as I felt it that night. It was formless and without apparent foundation; but it would no more leave me than my uneasy memory of the fierce instinct which had led him at such a critical instant to close his door against all help, though in so doing he had subjected a young girl to many minutes of intense embarrassment and mortifying indecision.

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