

**GREEN ANNA
KATHARINE**

A DIFFICULT PROBLEM

Anna Green

A Difficult Problem

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Anna Katharine Green

A Difficult Problem / 1900

I

“A LADY to see you, sir.”

I looked up and was at once impressed by the grace and beauty of the person thus introduced to me.

“Is there anything I can do to serve you?” I asked, rising.

She cast me a child-like look full of trust and candor as she seated herself in the chair I pointed out to her.

“I believe so, I hope so,” she earnestly assured me. “I—I am in great trouble. I have just lost my husband—but it is not that. It is the slip of paper I found on my dresser, and which—which—”

She was trembling violently and her words were fast becoming incoherent. I calmed her and asked her to relate her story just as it had happened; and after a few minutes of silent struggle she succeeded in collecting herself sufficiently to respond with some degree of connection and self-possession.

“I have been married six months. My name is Lucy Holmes. For the last few weeks my husband and myself have been living in an apartment house on Fifty-ninth Street, and as we had not a care in the world, we were very happy till Mr. Holmes was called away on business to Philadelphia. This was two weeks ago. Five days later I received an affectionate letter from him, in which he promised to come back the next day; and the news so delighted me that I accepted an invitation to the theater from some intimate friends of ours. The next morning I naturally felt fatigued and rose late; but I was very cheerful, for I expected my husband at noon. And now comes the perplexing mystery. In the course of dressing myself I stepped to my bureau, and seeing a small newspaper-slip attached to the cushion by a pin, I drew it off and read it. It was a death notice, and my hair rose and my limbs failed me as I took in its fatal and incredible words.

“Died this day at the Colonnade, James Forsythe De Witt Holmes. New York papers please copy.’

“James Forsythe De Witt Holmes was my husband, and his last letter, which was at that very moment lying beside the cushion, had been dated from the Colonnade. Was I dreaming or under the spell of some frightful hallucination which led me to misread the name on the slip of paper before me? I could not determine. My head, throat and chest seemed bound about with iron, so that I could neither speak nor breathe with freedom, and, suffering thus, I stood staring at this demoniacal bit of paper which in an instant had brought the shadow of death upon my happy life. Nor was I at all relieved when a little later I flew with the notice into a neighbor’s apartment, and praying her to read it for me, found that my eyes had not deceived me and that the name was indeed my husband’s and the notice one of death.

“Not from my own mind but from hers came the first suggestion of comfort.

“‘It cannot be your husband who is meant,’ said she; ‘but some one of the same name. Your husband wrote to you yesterday, and this person must have been dead at least two days for the printed notice of his decease to have reached New York. Some one has remarked the striking similarity of names, and wishing to startle you, cut the slip out and pinned it on your cushion.’

“I certainly knew of no one inconsiderate enough to do this, but the explanation was so plausible, I at once embraced it and sobbed aloud in my relief. But in the midst of my rejoicing I heard the bell ring in my apartment, and running thither, encountered a telegraph boy holding in his outstretched hand the yellow envelope which so often bespeaks death or disaster. The sight took my breath away.

Summoning my maid, whom I saw hastening towards me from an inner room, I begged her to open the telegram for me. Sir, I saw in her face, before she had read the first line, a confirmation of my very worst fears. My husband was—

The young widow, choked with her emotions, paused, recovered herself for the second time, and then went on.

“I had better show you the telegram.” Taking it from her pocket-book, she held it towards me. I read it at a glance. It was short, simple and direct.

“Come at once. Your husband found dead in his room this morning. Doctors say heart disease. Please telegraph.”

“You see it says this morning,” she explained, placing her delicate finger on the word she so eagerly quoted. “That means a week ago Wednesday, the same day on which the printed slip recording his death was found on my cushion. Do you not see something very strange in this?”

I did; but, before I ventured to express myself on this subject, I desired her to tell me what she had learned in her visit to Philadelphia.

Her answer was simple and straightforward.

“But little more than you find in this telegram. He died in his room. He was found lying on the floor near the bell button, which he had evidently risen to touch. One hand was clenched on his chest, but his face wore a peaceful look as if death had come too suddenly to cause him much suffering. His bed was undisturbed; he had died before retiring, possibly in the act of packing his trunk, for it was found nearly ready for the expressman. Indeed, there was every evidence of his intention to leave on an early morning train. He had even desired to be awakened at six o’clock; and it was his failure to respond to the summons of the bell-boy, which led to so early a discovery of his death. He had never complained of any distress in breathing, and we had always considered him a perfectly healthy man; but there was no reason for assigning any other cause than heart-failure to his sudden death, and so the burial certificate was made out to that effect, and I was allowed to bring him home and bury him in our vault at Wood-lawn. But—” and here her earnestness dried up the tears which had been flowing freely during this recital of her husband’s lonely death and sad burial,—“do you not think an investigation should be made into a death preceded by a false obituary notice? For I found when I was in Philadelphia that no paragraph such as I had found pinned to my cushion had been inserted in any paper there, nor had any other man of the same name ever registered at the Colonnade, much less died there.”

“Have you this notice with you?” I asked.

She immediately produced it, and while I was glancing it over remarked:

“Some persons would give a superstitious explanation to the whole matter; think I had received a supernatural warning and been satisfied with what they would call a spiritual manifestation. But I have not a bit of such folly in my composition. Living hands set up the type and printed the words which gave me so deathly a shock; and hands, with a real purpose in them, cut it from the paper and pinned it to my cushion for me to see when I woke on that fatal morning. But whose hands? That is what I want you to discover.”

I had caught the fever of her suspicions long before this and now felt justified in showing my interest.

“First, let me ask,” said I, “who has access to your rooms besides your maid?”

“No one; absolutely no one.”

“And what of her?”

“She is innocence itself. She is no common housemaid, but a girl my mother brought up, who for love of me consents to do such work in the household as my simple needs require.”

“I should like to see her.”

“There is no objection to your doing so; but you will gain nothing by it. I have already talked the subject over with her a dozen times and she is as much puzzled by it as I am myself. She says

she cannot see how any one could have found an entrance to my room during my sleep, as the doors were all locked. Yet, as she very naturally observes, some one must have done so, for she was in my bedroom herself just before I returned from the theater, and can swear, if necessary, that no such slip of paper was to be seen on my cushion, at that time, for her duties led her directly to my bureau and kept her there for full five minutes.”

“And you believed her?” I suggested.

“Implicitly.”

“In what direction, then, do your suspicions turn?”

“Alas! in no direction. That is the trouble. I don’t know whom to mistrust. It was because I was told that you had the credit of seeing light where others can see nothing but darkness, that I have sought your aid in this emergency. For the uncertainty surrounding this matter is killing me and will make my sorrow quite unendurable if I cannot obtain relief from it.”

“I do not wonder,” I began, struck by the note of truth in her tones. “And I shall certainly do what I can for you. But before we go any further, let us examine this scrap of newspaper and see what we can make out of it.”

I had already noted two or three points in connection with it, to which I now proceeded to direct her attention.

“Have you compared this notice,” I pursued, “with such others as you find every day in the papers?”

“No,” was her eager answer. “Is it not like them all—”

“Read,” was my quiet interruption. “‘On this day at the Colonnade—’ On what day? The date is usually given in all the *bona-fide* notices I have seen.”

“Is it?” she asked, her eyes moist with un-shed tears, opening widely in her astonishment.

“Look in the papers on your return home and see. Then the print. Observe that the type is identical on both sides of this make-believe clipping, while in fact there is always a perceptible difference between that used in the obituary column and that to be found in the columns devoted to other matter. Notice also,” I continued, holding up the scrap of paper between her and the light, “that the alignment on one side is not exactly parallel with that on the other; a discrepancy which would not exist if both sides had been printed on a newspaper press. These facts lead me to conclude, first, that the effort to match the type exactly was the mistake of a man who tries to do too much; and secondly, that one of the sides at least, presumably that containing the obituary notice, was printed on a hand-press, on the blank side of a piece of galley proof picked up in some newspaper office.”

“Let me see.” And stretching out her hand with the utmost eagerness, she took the slip and turned it over. Instantly a change took place in her countenance. She sank back in her seat and a blush of manifest confusion suffused her cheeks. “Oh!” she exclaimed, “what will you think of me! I brought this scrap of print into the house *myself*”

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