

GREEN ANNA KATHARINE

THE WOMAN IN THE
ALCOVE

Anna Green

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Anna Katharine Green

The Woman in the Alcove

I. THE WOMAN WITH THE DIAMOND

I was, perhaps, the plainest girl in the room that night. I was also the happiest—up to one o'clock. Then my whole world crumbled, or, at least, suffered an eclipse. Why and how, I am about to relate.

I was not made for love. This I had often said to myself; very often of late. In figure I am too diminutive, in face far too unbeautiful, for me to cherish expectations of this nature. Indeed, love had never entered into my plan of life, as was evinced by the nurse's diploma I had just gained after three years of hard study and severe training.

I was not made for love. But if I had been; had I been gifted with height, regularity of feature, or even with that eloquence of expression which redeems all defects save those which savor of deformity, I knew well whose eye I should have chosen to please, whose heart I should have felt proud to win.

This knowledge came with a rush to my heart—(did I say heart? I should have said understanding, which is something very different)—when, at the end of the first dance, I looked up from the midst of the bevy of girls by whom I was surrounded and saw Anson Durand's fine figure emerging from that quarter of the hall where our host and hostess stood to receive their guests. His eye was roaming hither and thither and his manner was both eager and expectant. Whom was he seeking? Some one of the many bright and vivacious girls about me, for he turned almost instantly our way. But which one?

I thought I knew. I remembered at whose house I had met him first, at whose house I had seen him many times since. She was a lovely girl, witty and vivacious, and she stood at this very moment at my elbow. In her beauty lay the lure, the natural lure for a man of his gifts and striking personality. If I continued to watch, I should soon see his countenance light up under the recognition she could not fail to give him. And I was right; in another instant it did, and with a brightness there was no mistaking. But one feeling common to the human heart lends such warmth, such expressiveness to the features. How handsome it made him look, how distinguished, how everything I was not except—

But what does this mean? He has passed Miss Sperry—passed her with a smile and a friendly word—and is speaking to me, singling me out, offering me his arm! He is smiling, too, not as he smiled on Miss Sperry, but more warmly, with more that is personal in it. I took his arm in a daze. The lights were dimmer than I thought; nothing was really bright except his smile. It seemed to change the world for me. I forgot that I was plain, forgot that I was small, with nothing to recommend me to the eye or heart, and let myself be drawn away, asking nothing, anticipating nothing, till I found myself alone with him in the fragrant recesses of the conservatory, with only the throb of music in our ears to link us to the scene we had left.

Why had he brought me here, into this fairyland of opalescent lights and intoxicating perfumes? What could he have to say—to show? Ah in another moment I knew. He had seized my hands, and love, ardent love, came pouring from his lips.

Could it be real? Was I the object of all this feeling, I? If so, then life had changed for me indeed.

Silent from rush of emotion, I searched his face to see if this Paradise, whose gates I was thus passionately bidden to enter, was indeed a verity or only a dream born of the excitement of the dance and the charm of a scene exceptional in its splendor and picturesqueness even for so luxurious a city as New York.

But it was no mere dream. Truth and earnestness were in his manner, and his words were neither feverish nor forced.

“I love you I! I need you!” So I heard, and so he soon made me believe. “You have charmed me from the first. Your tantalizing, trusting, loyal self, like no other, sweeter than any other, has drawn the heart from my breast. I have seen many women, admired many women, but you only have I loved. Will you be my wife?”

I was dazzled; moved beyond anything I could have conceived. I forgot all that I had hitherto said to myself—all that I had endeavored to impress upon my heart when I beheld him approaching, intent, as I believed, in his search for another woman; and, confiding in his honesty, trusting entirely to his faith, I allowed the plans and purposes of years to vanish in the glamour of this new joy, and spoke the word which linked us together in a bond which half an hour before I had never dreamed would unite me to any man.

His impassioned “Mine! mine!” filled my cup to overflowing. Something of the ecstasy of living entered my soul; which, in spite of all I have suffered since, recreated the world for me and made all that went before but the prelude to the new life, the new joy.

Oh, I was happy, happy, perhaps too happy! As the conservatory filled and we passed back into the adjoining room, the glimpse I caught of myself in one of the mirrors startled me into thinking so. For had it not been for the odd color of my dress and the unique way in which I wore my hair that night, I should not have recognized the beaming girl who faced me so naively from the depths of the responsive glass.

Can one be too happy? I do not know. I know that one can be too perplexed, too burdened and too sad.

Thus far I have spoken only of myself in connection with the evening’s elaborate function. But though entitled by my old Dutch blood to a certain social consideration which I am happy to say never failed me, I, even in this hour of supreme satisfaction, attracted very little attention and awoke small comment. There was another woman present better calculated to do this. A fair woman, large and of a bountiful presence, accustomed to conquest, and gifted with the power of carrying off her victories with a certain lazy grace irresistibly fascinating to the ordinary man; a gorgeously appareled woman, with a diamond on her breast too vivid for most women, almost too vivid for her. I noticed this diamond early in the evening, and then I noticed her. She was not as fine as the diamond, but she was very fine, and, had I been in a less ecstatic frame of mind, I might have envied the homage she received from all the men, not excepting him upon whose arm I leaned. Later, there was no one in the world I envied less.

The ball was a private and very elegant one. There were some notable guests. One gentleman in particular was pointed out to me as an Englishman of great distinction and political importance. I thought him a very interesting man for his years, but odd and a trifle self-centered. Though greatly courted, he seemed strangely restless under the fire of eyes to which he was constantly subjected, and only happy when free to use his own in contemplation of the scene about him. Had I been less absorbed in my own happiness I might have noted sooner than I did that this contemplation was confined to such groups as gathered about the lady with the diamond. But this I failed to observe at the time, and consequently was much surprised to come upon him, at the end of one of the dances, talking with this lady in an animated and courtly manner totally opposed to the apathy, amounting to boredom, with which he had hitherto met all advances.

Yet it was not admiration for her person which he openly displayed. During the whole time he stood there his eyes seldom rose to her face; they lingered mainly—and this was what aroused my curiosity—on the great fan of ostrich plumes which this opulent beauty held against her breast. Was he desirous of seeing the great diamond she thus unconsciously (or was it consciously) shielded from his gaze? It was possible, for, as I continued to note him, he suddenly bent toward her and as quickly raised himself again with a look which was quite inexplicable to me. The lady had shifted her fan a moment and his eyes had fallen on the gem.

The next thing I recall with any definiteness was a *tete-a-tete* conversation which I held with my lover on a certain yellow divan at the end of one of the halls.

To the right of this divan rose a curtained recess, highly suggestive of romance, called “the alcove.” As this alcove figures prominently in my story, I will pause here to describe it.

It was originally intended to contain a large group of statuary which our host, Mr. Ramsdell, had ordered from Italy to adorn his new house. He is a man of original ideas in regard to such matters, and in this instance had gone so far as to have this end of the house constructed with a special view to an advantageous display of this promised work of art. Fearing the ponderous effect of a pedestal large enough to hold such a considerable group, he had planned to raise it to the level of the eye by having the alcove floor built a few feet higher than the main one. A flight of low, wide steps connected the two, which, following the curve of the wall, added much to the beauty of this portion of the hall.

The group was a failure and was never shipped; but the alcove remained, and, possessing as it did all the advantages of a room in the way of heat and light, had been turned into a miniature retreat of exceptional beauty.

The seclusion it offered extended, or so we were happy to think, to the solitary divan at its base on which Mr. Durand and I were seated. With possibly an undue confidence in the advantage of our position, we were discussing a subject interesting only to ourselves, when Mr. Durand interrupted himself to declare: “You are the woman I want, you and you only. And I want you soon. When do you think you can marry me? Within a week—if—”

Did my look stop him? I was startled. I had heard no incoherent phrase from him before.

“A week!” I remonstrated. “We take more time than that to fit ourselves for a journey or some transient pleasure. I hardly realize my engagement yet.”

“You have not been thinking of it for these last two months as I have.”

“No,” I replied demurely, forgetting everything else in my delight at this admission.

“Nor are you a nomad among clubs and restaurants.”

“No, I have a home.”

“Nor do you love me as deeply as I do you.”

This I thought open to argument.

“The home you speak of is a luxurious one,” he continued. “I can not offer you its equal Do you expect me to?”

I was indignant.

“You know that I do not. Shall I, who deliberately chose a nurse’s life when an indulgent uncle’s heart and home were open to me, shrink from braving poverty with the man I love? We will begin as simply as you please—”

“No,” he peremptorily put in, yet with a certain hesitancy which seemed to speak of doubts he hardly acknowledged to himself, “I will not marry you if I must expose you to privation or to the genteel poverty I hate. I love you more than you realize, and wish to make your life a happy one. I can not give you all you have been accustomed to in your rich uncle’s house, but if matters prosper with me, if the chance I have built on succeeds—and it will fail or succeed tonight—you will have those comforts which love will heighten into luxuries and—and—”

He was becoming incoherent again, and this time with his eyes fixed elsewhere than on my face. Following his gaze, I discovered what had distracted his attention. The lady with the diamond was approaching us on her way to the alcove. She was accompanied by two gentlemen, both strangers to me, and her head, sparkling with brilliants, was turning from one to the other with an indolent grace. I was not surprised that the man at my side quivered and made a start as if to rise. She was a gorgeous image. In comparison with her imposing figure in its trailing robe of rich pink velvet, my diminutive frame in its sea-green gown must have looked as faded and colorless as a half-obliterated pastel.

“A striking woman,” I remarked as I saw he was not likely to resume the conversation which her presence had interrupted. “And what a diamond!”

The glance he cast me was peculiar.

“Did you notice it particularly?” he asked.

Astonished, for there was something very uneasy in his manner so that I half expected to see him rise and join the group he was so eagerly watching without waiting for my lips to frame a response, I quickly replied:

“It would be difficult not to notice what one would naturally expect to see only on the breast of a queen. But perhaps she is a queen. I should judge so from the homage which follows her.”

His eyes sought mine. There was inquiry in them, but it was an inquiry I did not understand.

“What can you know about diamonds?” he presently demanded. “Nothing but their glitter, and glitter is not all,—the gem she wears may be a very tawdry one.”

I flushed with humiliation. He was a dealer in gems—that was his business—and the check which he had put upon my enthusiasm certainly made me conscious of my own presumption. Yet I was not disposed to take back my words. I had had a better opportunity than himself for seeing this remarkable jewel, and, with the perversity of a somewhat ruffled mood, I burst forth, as soon as the color had subsided from my cheeks:

“No, no! It is glorious, magnificent. I never saw its like. I doubt if you ever have, for all your daily acquaintance with jewels. Its value must be enormous. Who is she? You seem to know her.”

It was a direct question, but I received no reply. Mr. Durand’s eyes had followed the lady, who had lingered somewhat ostentatiously on the top step and they did not return to me till she had vanished with her companions behind the long plush curtain which partly veiled the entrance. By this time he had forgotten my words, if he had ever heard them and it was with the forced animation of one whose thoughts are elsewhere that he finally returned to the old plea:

When would I marry him? If he could offer me a home in a month—and he would know by tomorrow if he could do so—would I come to him then? He would not say in a week; that was perhaps too soon; but in a month? Would I not promise to be his in a month?

What I answered I scarcely recall. His eyes had stolen back to the alcove and mine had followed them. The gentlemen who had accompanied the lady inside were coming out again, but others were advancing to take their places, and soon she was engaged in holding a regular court in this favored retreat.

Why should this interest me? Why should I notice her or look that way at all? Because Mr. Durand did? Possibly. I remember that for all his ardent love-making, I felt a little piqued that he should divide his attentions in this way. Perhaps I thought that for this evening, at least, he might have been blind to a mere coquette’s fascinations.

I was thus doubly engaged in listening to my lover’s words and in watching the various gentlemen who went up and down the steps, when a former partner advanced and reminded me that I had promised him a waltz. Loath to leave Mr. Durand, yet seeing no way of excusing myself to Mr. Fox, I cast an appealing glance at the former and was greatly chagrined to find him already on his feet.

“Enjoy your dance,” he cried; “I have a word to say to Mrs. Fairbrother,” and was gone before my new partner had taken me on his arm.

Was Mrs. Fairbrother the lady with the diamond? Yes; as I turned to enter the parlor with my partner, I caught a glimpse of Mr. Durand’s tall figure just disappearing from the step behind the sage-green curtains.

“Who is Mrs. Fairbrother?” I inquired of Mr. Fox at the end of the dance.

Mr. Fox, who is one of society’s perennial beaux, knows everybody.

“She is—well, she was Abner Fairbrother’s wife. You know Fairbrother, the millionaire who built that curious structure on Eighty-sixth Street. At present they are living apart—an amicable understanding, I believe. Her diamond makes her conspicuous. It is one of the most remarkable stones in New York, perhaps in the United States. Have you observed it?”

“Yes—that is, at a distance. Do you think her very handsome?”

“Mrs. Fairbrother? She’s called so, but she’s not my style.” Here he gave me a killing glance. “I admire women of mind and heart. They do not need to wear jewels worth an ordinary man’s fortune.”

I looked about for an excuse to leave this none too desirable partner.

“Let us go back into the long hall,” I urged. “The ceaseless whirl of these dancers is making me dizzy.”

With the ease of a gallant man he took me on his arm and soon we were promenading again in the direction of the alcove. A passing glimpse of its interior was afforded me as we turned to retrace our steps in front of the yellow divan. The lady with the diamond was still there. A fold of the superb pink velvet she wore protruded across the gap made by the half-drawn curtains, just as it had done a half-hour before. But it was impossible to see her face or who was with her. What I could see, however, and did, was the figure of a man leaning against the wall at the foot of the steps. At first I thought this person unknown to me, then I perceived that he was no other than the chief guest of the evening, the Englishman of whom I have previously spoken.

His expression had altered. He looked now both anxious and absorbed, particularly anxious and particularly absorbed; so much so that I was not surprised that no one ventured to approach him. Again I wondered and again I asked myself for whom or for what he was waiting. For Mr. Durand to leave this lady’s presence? No, no, I would not believe that. Mr. Durand could not be there still; yet some women make it difficult for a man to leave them and, realizing this, I could not forbear casting a parting glance behind me as, yielding to Mr. Fox’s importunities, I turned toward the supper-room. It showed me the Englishman in the act of lifting two cups of coffee from a small table standing near the reception-room door. As his manner plainly betokened whither he was bound with this refreshment, I felt all my uneasiness vanish, and was able to take my seat at one of the small tables with which the supper-room was filled, and for a few minutes, at least, lend an ear to Mr. Fox’s vapid compliments and trite opinions. Then my attention wandered.

I had not moved nor had I shifted my gaze from the scene before me the ordinary scene of a gay and well-filled supper-room, yet I found myself looking, as if through a mist I had not even seen develop, at something as strange, unusual and remote as any phantasm, yet distinct enough in its outlines for me to get a decided impression of a square of light surrounding the figure of a man in a peculiar pose not easily imagined and not easily described. It all passed in an instant, and I sat staring at the window opposite me with the feeling of one who has just seen a vision. Yet almost immediately I forgot the whole occurrence in my anxiety as to Mr. Durand’s whereabouts. Certainly he was amusing himself very much elsewhere or he would have found an opportunity of joining me long before this. He was not even in sight, and I grew weary of the endless menu and the senseless chit chat of my companion, and, finding him amenable to my whims, rose from my seat at table and made my way to a group of acquaintances standing just outside the supper-room door. As I listened to their greetings some impulse led me to cast another glance down the hall toward the alcove. A man—a waiter—was issuing from it in a rush. Bad news was in his face, and as his eyes encountered those of Mr. Ramsdell, who was advancing hurriedly to meet him, he plunged down the steps with a cry which drew a crowd about the two in an instant.

What was it? What had happened?

Mad with an anxiety I did not stop to define, I rushed toward this group now swaying from side to side in irrepressible excitement, when suddenly everything swam before me and I fell in a swoon to the floor.

Some one had shouted aloud

“Mrs. Fairbrother has been murdered and her diamond stolen! Lock the doors!”

II. THE GLOVES

I must have remained insensible for many minutes, for when I returned to full consciousness the supper-room was empty and the two hundred guests I had left seated at table were gathered in agitated groups about the hall. This was what I first noted; not till afterward did I realize my own situation. I was lying on a couch in a remote corner of this same hall and beside me, but not looking at me, stood my lover, Mr. Durand.

How he came to know my state and find me in the general disturbance I did not stop to inquire. It was enough for me at that moment to look up and see him so near. Indeed, the relief was so great, the sense of his protection so comforting that I involuntarily stretched out my hand in gratitude toward him, but, failing to attract his attention, slipped to the floor and took my stand at his side. This roused him and he gave me a look which steadied me, in spite of the thrill of surprise with which I recognized his extreme pallor and a certain peculiar hesitation in his manner not at all natural to it.

Meanwhile, some words uttered near us were slowly making their way into my benumbed brain. The waiter who had raised the first alarm was endeavoring to describe to an importunate group in advance of us what he had come upon in that murderous alcove.

"I was carrying about a tray of ices," he was saying, "and seeing the lady sitting there, went up. I had expected to find the place full of gentlemen, but she was all alone, and did not move as I picked my way over her long train. The next moment I had dropped ices, tray and all. I had come face to face with her and seen that she was dead. She had been stabbed and robbed. There was no diamond on her breast, but there was blood."

A hubbub of disordered sentences seasoned with horrified cries followed this simple description. Then a general movement took place in the direction of the alcove, during which Mr. Durand stooped to my ear and whispered:

"We must get out of this. You are not strong enough to stand such excitement. Don't you think we can escape by the window over there?"

"What, without wraps and in such a snowstorm?" I protested. "Besides, uncle will be looking for me. He came with me, you know."

An expression of annoyance, or was it perplexity, crossed Mr. Durand's face, and he made a movement as if to leave me.

"I must go," he began, but stopped at my glance of surprise and assumed a different air—one which became him very much better. "Pardon me, dear, I will take you to your uncle. This—this dreadful tragedy, interrupting so gay a scene, has quite upset me. I was always sensitive to the sight, the smell, even to the very mention of the word blood."

So was I, but not to the point of cowardice. But then I had not just come from an interview with the murdered woman. Her glances, her smiles, the lift of her eyebrows were not fresh memories to me. Some consideration was certainly due him for the shock he must be laboring under. Yet I did not know how to keep back the vital question.

"Who did it? You must have heard some one say."

"I have heard nothing," was his somewhat fierce rejoinder. Then, as I made a move, "What you do not wish to follow the crowd there?"

"I wish to find my uncle, and he is in that crowd."

Mr. Durand said nothing further, and together we passed down the hall. A strange mood pervaded my mind. Instead of wishing to fly a scene which under ordinary conditions would have filled me with utter repugnance, I felt a desire to see and hear everything. Not from curiosity, such as moved most of the people about me, but because of some strong instinctive feeling I could not understand; as if it were my heart which had been struck, and my fate which was trembling in the balance.

We were consequently among the first to hear such further details as were allowed to circulate among the now well-nigh frenzied guests. No one knew the perpetrator of the deed nor did there appear to be any direct evidence calculated to fix his identity. Indeed, the sudden death of this beautiful woman in the midst of festivity might have been looked upon as suicide, if the jewel had not been missing from her breast and the instrument of death removed from the wound. So far, the casual search which had been instituted had failed to produce this weapon; but the police would be here soon and then something would be done. As to the means of entrance employed by the assassin, there seemed to be but one opinion. The alcove contained a window opening upon a small balcony. By this he had doubtless entered and escaped. The long plush curtains which, during the early part of the evening, had remained looped back on either side of the casement, were found at the moment of the crime's discovery closely drawn together. Certainly a suspicious circumstance. However, the question was one easily settled. If any one had approached by the balcony there would be marks in the snow to show it. Mr. Ramsdell had gone out to see. He would be coming back soon.

"Do you think this a probable explanation of the crime?" I demanded of Mr. Durand at this juncture. "If I remember rightly this window overlooks the carriage drive; it must, therefore, be within plain sight of the door through which some three hundred guests have passed to-night. How could any one climb to such a height, lift the window and step in without being seen?"

"You forget the awning." He spoke quickly and with unexpected vivacity. "The awning runs up very near this window and quite shuts it off from the sight of arriving guests. The drivers of departing carriages could see it if they chanced to glance back. But their eyes are usually on their horses in such a crowd. The probabilities are against any of them having looked up." His brow had cleared; a weight seemed removed from his mind. "When I went into the alcove to see Mrs. Fairbrother, she was sitting in a chair near this window looking out. I remember the effect of her splendor against the snow sifting down in a steady stream behind her. The pink velvet—the soft green of the curtains on either side—her brilliants—and the snow for a background! Yes, the murderer came in that way. Her figure would be plain to any one outside, and if she moved and the diamond shone—Don't you see what a probable theory it is? There must be ways by which a desperate man might reach that balcony. I believe—"

How eager he was and with what a look he turned when the word came filtering through the crowd that, though footsteps had been found in the snow pointing directly toward the balcony, there was none on the balcony itself, proving, as any one could see, that the attack had not come from without, since no one could enter the alcove by the window without stepping on the balcony.

"Mr. Durand has suspicions of his own," I explained determinedly to myself. "He met some one going in as he stepped out. Shall I ask him to name this person?" No, I did not have the courage; not while his face wore so stern a look and was so resolutely turned away.

The next excitement was a request from Mr. Ramsdell for us all to go into the drawing-room. This led to various cries from hysterical lips, such as, "We are going to be searched!" "He believes the thief and murderer to be still in the house!" "Do you see the diamond on me?" "Why don't they confine their suspicions to the favored few who were admitted to the alcove?"

"They will," remarked some one close to my ear.

But quickly as I turned I could not guess from whom the comment came. Possibly from a much beflowered, bejeweled, elderly dame, whose eyes were fixed on Mr. Durand's averted face. If so, she received a defiant look from mine, which I do not believe she forgot in a hurry.

Alas! it was not the only curious, I might say searching glance I surprised directed against him as we made our way to where I could see my uncle struggling to reach us from a short side hall. The whisper seemed to have gone about that Mr. Durand had been the last one to converse with Mrs. Fairbrother prior to the tragedy.

In time I had the satisfaction of joining my uncle. He betrayed great relief at the sight of me, and, encouraged by his kindly smile, I introduced Mr. Durand. My conscious air must have produced

its impression, for he turned a startled and inquiring look upon my companion, then took me resolutely on his own arm, saying:

“There is likely to be some unpleasantness ahead for all of us. I do not think the police will allow any one to go till that diamond has been looked for. This is a very serious matter, dear. So many think the murderer was one of the guests.”

“I think so, too,” said I. But why I thought so or why I should say so with such vehemence, I do not know even now.

My uncle looked surprised.

“You had better not advance any opinions,” he advised. “A lady like yourself should have none on a subject so gruesome. I shall never cease regretting bringing you here tonight. I shall seize on the first opportunity to take you home. At present we are supposed to await the action of our host.”

“He can not keep all these people here long,” I ventured.

“No; most of us will be relieved soon. Had you not better get your wraps so as to be ready to go as soon as he gives the word?”

“I should prefer to have a peep at the people in the drawing-room first,” was my perverse reply. “I don’t know why I want to see them, but I do; and, uncle, I might as well tell you now that I engaged myself to Mr. Durand this evening—the gentleman with me when you first came up.”

“You have engaged yourself to—to this man—to marry him, do you mean?”

I nodded, with a sly look behind to see if Mr. Durand were near enough to hear. He was not, and I allowed my enthusiasm to escape in a few quick words.

“He has chosen me,” I said, “the plainest, most uninteresting puss in the whole city.” My uncle smiled. “And I believe he loves me; at all events, I know that I love him.”

My uncle sighed, while giving me the most affectionate of glances.

“It’s a pity you should have come to this understanding to-night,” said he. “He’s an acquaintance of the murdered woman, and it is only right for you to know that you will have to leave him behind when you start for home. All who have been seen entering that alcove this evening will necessarily be detained here till the coroner arrives.”

My uncle and I strolled toward the drawing-room and as we did so we passed the library. It held but one occupant, the Englishman. He was seated before a table, and his appearance was such as precluded any attempt at intrusion, even if one had been so disposed. There was a fixity in his gaze and a frown on his powerful forehead which bespoke a mind greatly agitated. It was not for me to read that mind, much as it interested me, and I passed on, chatting, as if I had not the least desire to stop.

I can not say how much time elapsed before my uncle touched me on the arm with the remark:

“The police are here in full force. I saw a detective in plain clothes look in here a minute ago. He seemed to have his eye on you. There he is again! What can he want? No, don’t turn; he’s gone away now.”

Frightened as I had never been in all my life, I managed to keep my head up and maintain an indifferent aspect. What, as my uncle said, could a detective want of me? I had nothing to do with the crime; not in the remotest way could I be said to be connected with it; why, then, had I caught the attention of the police? Looking about, I sought Mr. Durand. He had left me on my uncle’s coming up, but had remained, as I supposed, within sight. But at this moment he was nowhere to be seen. Was I afraid on his account? Impossible; yet—

Happily just then the word was passed about that the police had given orders that, with the exception of such as had been requested to remain to answer questions, the guests generally should feel themselves at liberty to depart.

The time had now come to take a stand and I informed my uncle, to his evident chagrin, that I should not leave as long as any excuse could be found for staying.

He said nothing at the time, but as the noise of departing carriages gradually lessened and the great hall and drawing-rooms began to wear a look of desertion he at last ventured on this gentle protest:

“You have more pluck, Rita, than I supposed. Do you think it wise to stay on here? Will not people imagine that you have been requested to do so? Look at those waiters hanging about in the different doorways. Run up and put on your wraps. Mr. Durand will come to the house fast enough as soon as he is released. I give you leave to sit up for him if you will; only let us leave this place before that impertinent little man dares to come around again,” he artfully added.

But I stood firm, though somewhat moved by his final suggestion; and, being a small tyrant in my way, at least with him, I carried my point.

Suddenly my anxiety became poignant. A party of men, among whom I saw Mr. Durand, appeared at the end of the hall, led by a very small but self-important personage whom my uncle immediately pointed out as the detective who had twice come to the door near which I stood. As this man looked up and saw me still there, a look of relief crossed his face, and, after a word or two with another stranger of seeming authority, he detached himself from the group he had ushered upon the scene, and, approaching me respectfully enough, said with a deprecatory glance at my uncle whose frown he doubtless understood:

“Miss Van Arsdale, I believe?”

I nodded, too choked to speak.

“I am sorry, Madam, if you were expecting to go. Inspector Dalzell has arrived and would like to speak to you. Will you step into one of these rooms? Not the library, but any other. He will come to you as quickly as he can.”

I tried to carry it off bravely and as if I saw nothing in this summons which was unique or alarming. But I succeeded only in dividing a wavering glance between him and the group of men of which he had just formed a part. In the latter were several gentlemen whom I had noted in Mrs. Fairbrother’s train early in the evening and a few strangers, two of whom were officials. Mr. Durand was with the former, and his expression did not encourage me.

“The affair is very serious,” commented the detective on leaving me. “That’s our excuse for any trouble we may be putting you to.” I clutched my uncle’s arm.

“Where shall we go?” I asked. “The drawing-room is too large. In this hall my eyes are forever traveling in the direction of the alcove. Don’t you know some little room? Oh, what, what can he want of me?”

“Nothing serious, nothing important,” blustered my good uncle. “Some triviality such as you can answer in a moment. A little room? Yes, I know one, there, under the stairs. Come, I will find the door for you. Why did we ever come to this wretched ball?”

I had no answer for this. Why, indeed!

My uncle, who is a very patient man, guided me to the place he had picked out, without adding a word to the ejaculation in which he had just allowed his impatience to expend itself. But once seated within, and out of the range of peering eyes and listening ears, he allowed a sigh to escape him which expressed the fullness of his agitation.

“My dear,” he began, and stopped. “I feel—” here he again came to a pause—“that you should know—”

“What?” I managed to ask.

“That I do not like Mr. Durand and—that others do not like him.”

“Is it because of something you knew about him before to-night?”

He made no answer.

“Or because he was seen, like many other gentlemen, talking with that woman some time before—a long time before—she was attacked for her diamond and murdered?”

“Pardon me, my dear, he was the last one seen talking to her. Some one may yet be found who went in after he came out, but as yet he is considered the last. Mr. Ramsdell himself told me so.”

“It makes no difference,” I exclaimed, in all the heat of my long-suppressed agitation. “I am willing to stake my life on his integrity and honor. No man could talk to me as he did early this evening with any vile intentions at heart. He was interested, no doubt, like many others, in one who had the name of being a captivating woman, but—”

I paused in sudden alarm. A look had crossed my uncle’s face which assured me that we were no longer alone. Who could have entered so silently? In some trepidation I turned to see. A gentleman was standing in the doorway, who smiled as I met his eye.

“Is this Miss Van Arsdale?” he asked.

Instantly my courage, which had threatened to leave me, returned and I smiled.

“I am,” said I. “Are you the inspector?”

“Inspector Dalzell,” he explained with a bow, which included my uncle.

Then he closed the door.

“I hope I have not frightened you,” he went on, approaching me with a gentlemanly air. “A little matter has come up concerning which I mean to be perfectly frank with you. It may prove to be of trivial importance; if so, you will pardon my disturbing you. Mr. Durand—you know him?”

“I am engaged to him,” I declared before poor uncle could raise his hand.

“You are engaged to him. Well, that makes it difficult, and yet, in some respects, easier for me to ask a certain question.”

It must have made it more difficult than easy, for he did not proceed to put this question immediately, but went on:

“You know that Mr. Durand visited Mrs. Fairbrother in the alcove a little while before her death?”

“I have been told so.”

“He was seen to go in, but I have not yet found any one who saw him come out; consequently we have been unable to fix the exact minute when he did so. What is the matter, Miss Van Arsdale? You want to say something?”

“No, no,” I protested, reconsidering my first impulse. Then, as I met his look, “He can probably tell you that himself. I am sure he would not hesitate.”

“We shall ask him later,” was the inspector’s response. “Meanwhile, are you ready to assure me that since that time he has not intrusted you with a little article to keep—No, no, I do not mean the diamond,” he broke in, in very evident dismay, as I fell back from him in irrepressible indignation and alarm. “The diamond—well, we shall look for that later; it is another article we are in search of now, one which Mr. Durand might very well have taken in his hand without realizing just what he was doing. As it is important for us to find this article, and as it is one he might very naturally have passed over to you when he found himself in the hall with it in his hand, I have ventured to ask you if this surmise is correct.”

“It is not,” I retorted fiercely, glad that I could speak from my very heart. “He has given me nothing to keep for him. He would not—”

Why that peculiar look in the inspector’s eye? Why did he reach out for a chair and seat me in it before he took up my interrupted sentence and finished it?

“—would not give you anything to hold which had belonged to another woman? Miss Van Arsdale, you do not know men. They do many things which a young, trusting girl like yourself would hardly expect from them.”

“Not Mr. Durand,” I maintained stoutly.

“Perhaps not; let us hope not.” Then, with a quick change of manner, he bent toward me, with a sidelong look at uncle, and, pointing to my gloves, remarked: “You wear gloves. Did you feel the need of two pairs, that you carry another in that pretty bag hanging from your arm?”

I started, looked down, and then slowly drew up into my hand the bag he had mentioned. The white finger of a glove was protruding from the top. Any one could see it; many probably had. What did it mean? I had brought no extra pair with me.

“This is not mine,” I began, faltering into silence as I perceived my uncle turn and walk a step or two away.

“The article we are looking for,” pursued the inspector, “is a pair of long, white gloves, supposed to have been worn by Mrs. Fairbrother when she entered the alcove. Do you mind showing me those, a finger of which I see?”

I dropped the bag into his hand. The room and everything in it was whirling around me. But when I noted what trouble it was to his clumsy fingers to open it, my senses returned and, reaching for the bag, I pulled it open and snatched out the gloves. They had been hastily rolled up and some of the fingers were showing.

“Let me have them,” he said.

With quaking heart and shaking fingers I handed over the gloves.

“Mrs. Fairbrother’s hand was not a small one,” he observed as he slowly unrolled them. “Yours is. We can soon tell—”

But that sentence was never finished. As the gloves fell open in his grasp he uttered a sudden, sharp ejaculation and I a smothered shriek. An object of superlative brilliancy had rolled out from them. The diamond! the gem which men said was worth a king’s ransom, and which we all knew had just cost a life.

III. ANSON DURAND

With benumbed senses and a dismayed heart, I stared at the fallen jewel as at some hateful thing menacing both my life and honor.

“I have had nothing to do with it,” I vehemently declared. “I did not put the gloves in my bag, nor did I know the diamond was in them. I fainted at the first alarm, and—”

“There! there! I know,” interposed the inspector kindly. “I do not doubt you in the least; not when there is a man to doubt. Miss Van Arsdale, you had better let your uncle take you home. I will see that the hall is cleared for you. Tomorrow I may wish to talk to you again, but I will spare you all further importunity tonight.”

I shook my head. It would require more courage to leave at that moment than to stay. Meeting the inspector’s eye firmly, I quietly declared,

“If Mr. Durand’s good name is to suffer in any way, I will not forsake him. I have confidence in his integrity, if you have not. It was not his hand, but one much more guilty, which dropped this jewel into the bag.”

“So! so! do not be too sure of that, little woman. You had better take your lesson at once. It will be easier for you, and more wholesome for him.”

Here he picked up the jewel.

“Well, they said it was a wonder!” he exclaimed, in sudden admiration. “I am not surprised, now that I have seen a great gem, at the famous stories I have read of men risking life and honor for their possession. If only no blood had been shed!”

“Uncle! uncle!” I wailed aloud in my agony.

It was all my lips could utter, but to uncle it was enough. Speaking for the first time, he asked to have a passage made for us, and when the inspector moved forward to comply, he threw his arm about me, and was endeavoring to find fitting words with which to fill up the delay, when a short altercation was heard from the doorway, and Mr. Durand came rushing in, followed immediately by the inspector.

His first look was not at myself, but at the bag, which still hung from my arm. As I noted this action, my whole inner self seemed to collapse, dragging my happiness down with it. But my countenance remained unchanged, too much so, it seems; for when his eye finally rose to my face, he found there what made him recoil and turn with something like fierceness on his companion.

“You have been talking to her,” he vehemently protested. “Perhaps you have gone further than that. What has happened here? I think I ought to know. She is so guileless, Inspector Dalzell; so perfectly free from all connection with this crime. Why have you shut her up here, and plied her with questions, and made her look at me with such an expression, when all you have against me is just what you have against some half-dozen others,—that I was weak enough, or unfortunate enough, to spend a few minutes with that unhappy woman in the alcove before she died?”

“It might be well if Miss Van Arsdale herself would answer you,” was the inspector’s quiet retort. “What you have said may constitute all that we have against you, but it is not all we have against her.”

I gasped, not so much at this seeming accusation, the motive of which I believed myself to understand, but at the burning blush with which it was received by Mr. Durand.

“What do you mean?” he demanded, with certain odd breaks in his voice. “What can you have against her?”

“A triviality,” returned the inspector, with a look in my direction that was, I felt, not to be mistaken.

“I do not call it a triviality,” I burst out. “It seems that Mrs. Fairbrother, for all her elaborate toilet, was found without gloves on her arms. As she certainly wore them on entering the alcove, the

police have naturally been looking for them. And where do you think they have found them? Not in the alcove with her, not in the possession of the man who undoubtedly carried them away with him, but—”

“I know, I know,” Mr. Durand hoarsely put in. “You need not say any more. Oh, my poor Rita! what have I brought upon you by my weakness?”

“Weakness!”

He started; I started; my voice was totally unrecognizable.

“I should give it another name,” I added coldly.

For a moment he seemed to lose heart, then he lifted his head again, and looked as handsome as when he pleaded for my hand in the little conservatory.

“You have that right,” said he; “besides, weakness at such a time, and under such an exigency, is little short of wrong. It was unmanly in me to endeavor to secrete these gloves; more than unmanly for me to choose for their hiding-place the recesses of an article belonging exclusively to yourself. I acknowledge it, Rita, and shall meet only my just punishment if you deny me in the future both your sympathy and regard. But you must let me assure you and these gentlemen also, one of whom can make it very unpleasant for me, that consideration for you, much more than any miserable anxiety about myself, lay at the bottom of what must strike you all as an act of unpardonable cowardice. From the moment I learned of this woman’s murder in the alcove, where I had visited her, I realized that every one who had been seen to approach her within a half-hour of her death would be subjected to a more or less rigid investigation, and I feared, if her gloves were found in my possession, some special attention might be directed my way which would cause you unmerited distress. So, yielding to an impulse which I now recognize as a most unwise, as well as unworthy one, I took advantage of the bustle about us, and of the insensibility into which you had fallen, to tuck these miserable gloves into the bag I saw lying on the floor at your side. I do not ask your pardon. My whole future life shall be devoted to winning that; I simply wish to state a fact.”

“Very good!” It was the inspector who spoke; I could not have uttered a word to save my life. “Perhaps you will now feel that you owe it to this young lady to add how you came to have these gloves in your possession?”

“Mrs. Fairbrother handed them to me.”

“Handed them to you?”

“Yes, I hardly know why myself. She asked me to take care of them for her. I know that this must strike you as a very peculiar statement. It was my realization of the unfavorable effect it could not fail to produce upon those who heard it, which made me dread any interrogation on the subject. But I assure you it was as I say. She put the gloves into my hand while I was talking to her, saying they incommoded her.”

“And you?”

“Well, I held them for a few minutes, then I put them in my pocket, but quite automatically, and without thinking very much about it. She was a woman accustomed to have her own way. People seldom questioned it, I judge.”

Here the tension about my throat relaxed, and I opened my lips to speak. But the inspector, with a glance of some authority, forestalled me.

“Were the gloves open or rolled up when she offered them to you?”

“They were rolled up.”

“Did you see her take them off?”

“Assuredly.”

“And roll them up?”

“Certainly.”

“After which she passed them over to you?”

“Not immediately. She let them lie in her lap for a while.”

“While you talked?”

Mr. Durand bowed.

“And looked at the diamond?”

Mr. Durand bowed for the second time.

“Had you ever seen so fine a diamond before?”

“No.”

“Yet you deal in precious stones?”

“That is my business.”

“And are regarded as a judge of them?”

“I have that reputation.”

“Mr. Durand, would you know this diamond if you saw it?”

“I certainly should.”

“The setting was an uncommon one, I hear.”

“Quite an unusual one.”

The inspector opened his hand.

“Is this the article?”

“Good God! Where—”

“Don’t you know?”

“I do not.”

The inspector eyed him gravely.

“Then I have a bit of news for you. It was hidden in the gloves you took from Mrs. Fairbrother. Miss Van Arsdale was present at their unrolling.”

Do we live, move, breathe at certain moments? It hardly seems so. I know that I was conscious of but one sense, that of seeing; and of but one faculty, that of judgment. Would he flinch, break down, betray guilt, or simply show astonishment? I chose to believe it was the latter feeling only which informed his slowly whitening and disturbed features. Certainly it was all his words expressed, as his glances flew from the stone to the gloves, and back again to the inspector’s face.

“I can not believe it. I can not believe it.” And his hand flew wildly to his forehead.

“Yet it is the truth, Mr. Durand, and one you have now to face. How will you do this? By any further explanations, or by what you may consider a discreet silence?”

“I have nothing to explain,—the facts are as I have stated.”

The inspector regarded him with an earnestness which made my heart sink.

“You can fix the time of this visit, I hope; tell us, I mean, just when you left the alcove. You must have seen some one who can speak for you.”

“I fear not.”

Why did he look so disturbed and uncertain?

“There were but few persons in the hall just then,” he went on to explain. “No one was sitting on the yellow divan.”

“You know where you went, though? Whom you saw and what you did before the alarm spread?”

“Inspector, I am quite confused. I did go somewhere; I did not remain in that part of the hall. But I can tell you nothing definite, save that I walked about, mostly among strangers, till the cry rose which sent us all in one direction and me to the side of my fainting sweetheart.”

“Can you pick out any stranger you talked to, or any one who might have noted you during this interval? You see, for the sake of this little woman, I wish to give you every chance.”

“Inspector, I am obliged to throw myself on your mercy. I have no such witness to my innocence as you call for. Innocent people seldom have. It is only the guilty who take the trouble to provide for such contingencies.”

This was all very well, if it had been uttered with a straightforward air and in a clear tone. But it was not. I who loved him felt that it was not, and consequently was more or less prepared for the change which now took place in the inspector's manner. Yet it pierced me to the heart to observe this change, and I instinctively dropped my face into my hands when I saw him move toward Mr. Durand with some final order or word of caution.

Instantly (and who can account for such phenomena?) there floated into view before my retina a reproduction of the picture I had seen, or imagined myself to have seen, in the supper-room; and as at that time it opened before me an unknown vista quite removed from the surrounding scene, so it did now, and I beheld again in faint outlines, and yet with the effect of complete distinctness, a square of light through which appeared an open passage partly shut off from view by a half-lifted curtain and the tall figure of a man holding back this curtain and gazing, or seeming to gaze, at his own breast, on which he had already laid one quivering finger.

What did it mean? In the excitement of the horrible occurrence which had engrossed us all, I had forgotten this curious experience; but on feeling anew the vague sensation of shock and expectation which seemed its natural accompaniment, I became conscious of a sudden conviction that the picture which had opened before me in the supper-room was the result of a reflection in a glass or mirror of something then going on in a place not otherwise within the reach of my vision; a reflection, the importance of which I suddenly realized when I recalled at what a critical moment it had occurred. A man in a state of dread looking at his breast, within five minutes of the stir and rush of the dreadful event which had marked this evening!

A hope, great as the despair in which I had just been sunk, gave me courage to drop my hands and advance impetuously toward the inspector.

“Don't speak, I pray; don't judge any of us further till you have heard what I have to say.”

In great astonishment and with an aspect of some severity, he asked me what I had to say now which I had not had the opportunity of saying before. I replied with all the passion of a forlorn hope that it was only at this present moment I remembered a fact which might have a very decided bearing on this case; and, detecting evidences, as I thought, of relenting on his part, I backed up this statement by an entreaty for a few words with him apart, as the matter I had to tell was private and possibly too fanciful for any ear but his own.

He looked as if he apprehended some loss of valuable time, but, touched by the involuntary gesture of appeal with which I supplemented my request, he led me into a corner, where, with just an encouraging glance toward Mr. Durand, who seemed struck dumb by my action, I told the inspector of that momentary picture which I had seen reflected in what I was now sure was some window-pane or mirror.

“It was at a time coincident, or very nearly coincident, with the perpetration of the crime you are now investigating,” I concluded. “Within five minutes afterward came the shout which roused us all to what had happened in the alcove. I do not know what passage I saw or what door or even what figure; but the latter, I am sure, was that of the guilty man. Something in the outline (and it was the outline only I could catch) expressed an emotion incomprehensible to me at the moment, but which, in my remembrance, impresses me as that of fear and dread. It was not the entrance to the alcove I beheld—that would have struck me at once—but some other opening which I might recognize if I saw it. Can not that opening be found, and may it not give a clue to the man I saw skulking through it with terror and remorse in his heart?”

“Was this figure, when you saw it, turned toward you or away?” the inspector inquired with unexpected interest.

“Turned partly away. He was going from me.”

“And you sat—where?”

“Shall I show you?”

The inspector bowed, then with a low word of caution turned to my uncle.

“I am going to take this young lady into the hall for a moment, at her own request. May I ask you and Mr. Durand to await me here?”

Without pausing for reply, he threw open the door and presently we were pacing the deserted supper-room, seeking the place where I had sat. I found it almost by a miracle,—everything being in great disorder. Guided by my bouquet, which I had left behind me in my escape from the table, I laid hold of the chair before which it lay, and declared quite confidently to the inspector:

“This is where I sat.”

Naturally his glance and mine both flew to the opposite wall. A window was before us of an unusual size and make. Unlike any which had ever before come under my observation, it swung on a pivot, and, though shut at the present moment, might very easily, when opened, present its huge pane at an angle capable of catching reflections from some of the many mirrors decorating the reception-room situated diagonally across the hall. As all the doorways on this lower floor were of unusual width, an open path was offered, as it were, for these reflections to pass, making it possible for scenes to be imaged here which, to the persons involved, would seem as safe from any one’s scrutiny as if they were taking place in the adjoining house.

As we realized this, a look passed between us of more than ordinary significance. Pointing to the window, the inspector turned to a group of waiters watching us from the other side of the room and asked if it had been opened that evening.

The answer came quickly.

“Yes, sir,—just before the—the—”

“I understand,” broke in the inspector; and, leaning over me, he whispered: “Tell me again exactly what you thought you saw.”

But I could add little to my former description. “Perhaps you can tell me this,” he kindly persisted. “Was the picture, when you saw it, on a level with your eye, or did you have to lift your head in order to see it?”

“It was high up,—in the air, as it were. That seemed its oddest feature.”

The inspector’s mouth took a satisfied curve. “Possibly I might identify the door and passage, if I saw them,” I suggested.

“Certainly, certainly,” was his cheerful rejoinder; and, summoning one of his men, he was about to give some order, when his impulse changed, and he asked if I could draw.

I assured him, in some surprise, that I was far from being an adept in that direction, but that possibly I might manage a rough sketch; whereupon he pulled a pad and pencil from his pocket and requested me to make some sort of attempt to reproduce, on paper, my memory of this passage and the door.

My heart was beating violently, and the pencil shook in my hand, but I knew that it would not do for me to show any hesitation in fixing for all eyes what, unaccountably to myself, continued to be perfectly plain to my own. So I endeavored to do as he bade me, and succeeded, to some extent, for he uttered a slight ejaculation at one of its features, and, while duly expressing his thanks, honored me with a very sharp look.

“Is this your first visit to this house?” he asked.

“No; I have been here before.”

“In the evening, or in the afternoon?”

“In the afternoon.”

“I am told that the main entrance is not in use to-night.”

“No. A side door is provided for occasions like the present. Guests entering there find a special hall and staircase, by which they can reach the upstairs dressing-rooms, without crossing the main hall. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes, that is what I mean.”

I stared at him in wonder. What lay back of such questions as these?

“You came in, as others did, by this side entrance,” he now proceeded. “Did you notice, as you turned to go up stairs, an arch opening into a small passageway at your left?”

“I did not,” I began, flushing, for I thought I understood him now. “I was too eager to reach the dressing-room to look about me.”

“Very well,” he replied; “I may want to show you that arch.”

The outline of an arch, backing the figure we were endeavoring to identify, was a marked feature in the sketch I had shown him.

“Will you take a seat near by while I make a study of this matter?”

I turned with alacrity to obey. There was something in his air and manner which made me almost buoyant. Had my fanciful interpretation of what I had seen reached him with the conviction it had me? If so, there was hope,—hope for the man I loved, who had gone in and out between curtains, and not through any arch such as he had mentioned or I had described. Providence was working for me. I saw it in the way the men now moved about, swinging the window to and fro, under the instruction of the inspector, manipulating the lights, opening doors and drawing back curtains. Providence was working for me, and when, a few minutes later, I was asked to reseat myself in my old place at the supper-table and take another look in that slightly deflected glass, I knew that my effort had met with its reward, and that for the second time I was to receive the impression of a place now indelibly imprinted on my consciousness.

“Is not that it?” asked the inspector, pointing at the glass with a last look at the imperfect sketch I had made him, and which he still held in his hand.

“Yes,” I eagerly responded. “All but the man. He whose figure I see there is another person entirely; I see no remorse, or even fear, in his looks.”

“Of course not. You are looking at the reflection of one of my men. Miss Van Arsdale, do you recognize the place now under your eye?”

“I do not. You spoke of an arch in the hall, at the left of the carriage entrance, and I see an arch in the window-pane before me, but—”

“You are looking straight through the alcove,—perhaps you did not know that another door opened at its back,—into the passage which runs behind it. Farther on is the arch, and beyond that arch the side hall and staircase leading to the dressing-rooms. This door, the one in the rear of the alcove, I mean, is hidden from those entering from the main hall by draperies which have been hung over it for this occasion, but it is quite visible from the back passageway, and there can be no doubt that it was by its means the man, whose reflected image you saw, both entered and left the alcove. It is an important fact to establish, and we feel very much obliged to you for the aid you have given us in this matter.”

Then, as I continued to stare at him in my elation and surprise, he added, in quick explanation:

“The lights in the alcove, and in the several parlors, are all hung with shades, as you must perceive, but the one in the hall, beyond the arch, is very bright, which accounts for the distinctness of this double reflection. Another thing,—and it is a very interesting point,—it would have been impossible for this reflection to be noticeable from where you sit, if the level of the alcove flooring had not been considerably higher than that of the main floor. But for this freak of the architect, the continual passing to and fro of people would have prevented the reflection in its passage from surface to surface. Miss Van Arsdale, it would seem that by one of those chances which happen but once or twice in a lifetime, every condition was propitious at the moment to make this reflection a possible occurrence, even the location and width of the several doorways and the exact point at which the portiere was drawn aside from the entrance to the alcove.”

“It is wonderful,” I cried, “wonderful!” Then, to his astonishment, perhaps, I asked if there was not a small door of communication between the passageway back of the alcove and the large central hall.

“Yes,” he replied. “It opens just beyond the fireplace. Three small steps lead to it.”

“I thought so,” I murmured, but more to myself than to him. In my mind I was thinking how a man, if he so wished, could pass from the very heart of this assemblage into the quiet passageway, and so on into the alcove, without attracting very much attention from his fellow guests. I forgot that there was another way of approach even less noticeable than by the small staircase running up beyond the arch directly to the dressing-rooms.

That no confusion may arise in any one’s mind in regard to these curious approaches, I subjoin a plan of this portion of the lower floor as it afterward appeared in the leading dailies.

“And Mr. Durand?” I stammered, as I followed the inspector back to the room where we had left that gentleman. “You will believe his statement now and look for this second intruder with the guiltily-hanging head and frightened mien?”

“Yes,” he replied, stopping me on the threshold of the door and taking my hand kindly in his, “if—(don’t start, my dear; life is full of trouble for young and old, and youth is the best time to face a sad experience) if he is not himself the man you saw staring in frightened horror at his breast. Have you not noticed that he is not dressed in all respects like the other gentlemen present? That, though he has not donned his overcoat, he has put on, somewhat prematurely, one might say, the large silk handkerchief he presumably wears under it? Have you not noticed this, and asked yourself why?”

I had noticed it. I had noticed it from the moment I recovered from my fainting fit, but I had not thought it a matter of sufficient interest to ask, even of myself, his reason for thus hiding his shirt-front. Now I could not. My faculties were too confused, my heart too deeply shaken by the suggestion which the inspector’s words conveyed, for me to be conscious of anything but the devouring question as to what I should do if, by my own mistaken zeal, I had succeeded in plunging the man I loved yet deeper into the toils in which he had become enmeshed.

The inspector left me no time for the settlement of this question. Ushering me back into the room where Mr. Durand and my uncle awaited our return in apparently unrelieved silence, he closed the door upon the curious eyes of the various persons still lingering in the hall, and abruptly said to Mr. Durand:

“The explanations you have been pleased to give of the manner in which this diamond came into your possession are not too fanciful for credence, if you can satisfy us on another point which has awakened some doubt in the mind of one of my men. Mr. Durand, you appear to have prepared yourself for departure somewhat prematurely. Do you mind removing that handkerchief for a moment? My reason for so peculiar a request will presently appear.”

Alas, for my last fond hope! Mr. Durand, with a face as white as the background of snow framed by the uncurtained window against which he leaned, lifted his hand as if to comply with the inspector’s request, then let it fall again with a grating laugh.

“I see that I am not likely to escape any of the results of my imprudence,” he cried, and with a quick jerk bared his shirt-front.

A splash of red defiled its otherwise uniform whiteness! That it was the red of heart’s blood was proved by the shrinking look he unconsciously cast at it.

IV. EXPLANATIONS

My love for Anson Durand died at sight of that crimson splash or I thought it did. In this spot of blood on the breast of him to whom I had given my heart I could read but one word—guilt—heinous guilt, guilt denied and now brought to light in language that could be seen and read by all men. Why should I stay in such a presence? Had not the inspector himself advised me to go?

Yes, but another voice bade me remain. Just as I reached the door, Anson Durand found his voice and I heard, in the full, sweet tones I loved so well:

“Wait I am not to be judged like this. I will explain!”

But here the inspector interposed.

“Do you think it wise to make any such attempt without the advice of counsel, Mr. Durand?”

The indignation with which Mr. Durand wheeled toward him raised in me a faint hope.

“Good God, yes!” he cried. “Would you have me leave Miss Van Arsdale one minute longer than is necessary to such dreadful doubts? Rita—Miss Van Arsdale—weakness, and weakness only, has brought me into my present position. I did not kill Mrs. Fairbrother, nor did I knowingly take her diamond, though appearances look that way, as I am very ready to acknowledge. I did go to her in the alcove, not once, but twice, and these are my reasons for doing so: About three months ago a certain well-known man of enormous wealth came to me with the request that I should procure for him a diamond of superior beauty. He wished to give it to his wife, and he wished it to outshine any which could now be found in New York. This meant sending abroad—an expense he was quite willing to incur on the sole condition that the stone should not disappoint him when he saw it, and that it was to be in his hands on the eighteenth of March, his wife’s birthday. Never before had I had such an opportunity for a large stroke of business. Naturally elated, I entered at once into correspondence with the best known dealers on the other side, and last week a diamond was delivered to me which seemed to fill all the necessary requirements. I had never seen a finer stone, and was consequently rejoicing in my success, when some one, I do not remember who now, chanced to speak in my hearing of the wonderful stone possessed by a certain Mrs. Fairbrother—a stone so large, so brilliant and so precious altogether that she seldom wore it, though it was known to connoisseurs and had a great reputation at Tiffany’s, where it had once been sent for some alteration in the setting. Was this stone larger and finer than the one I had procured with so much trouble? If so, my labor had all been in vain, for my patron must have known of this diamond and would expect to see it surpassed.

“I was so upset by this possibility that I resolved to see the jewel and make comparisons for myself. I found a friend who agreed to introduce me to the lady. She received me very graciously and was amiable enough until the subject of diamonds was broached, when she immediately stiffened and left me without an opportunity of proffering my request. However, on every other subject she was affable, and I found it easy enough to pursue the acquaintance till we were almost on friendly terms. But I never saw the diamond, nor would she talk about it, though I caused her some surprise when one day I drew out before her eyes the one I had procured for my patron and made her look at it. ‘Fine,’ she cried, ‘fine!’ But I failed to detect any envy in her manner, and so knew that I had not achieved the object set me by my wealthy customer. This was a woeful disappointment; yet, as Mrs. Fairbrother never wore her diamond, it was among the possibilities that he might be satisfied with the very fine gem I had obtained for him, and, influenced by this hope, I sent him this morning a request to come and see it tomorrow. Tonight I attended this ball, and almost as soon as I enter the drawing-room I hear that Mrs. Fairbrother is present and is wearing her famous jewel. What could you expect of me? Why, that I would make an effort to see it and so be ready with a reply to my exacting customer when he should ask me to-morrow if the stone I showed him had its peer in the city. But was not in the drawing-room then, and later I became interested elsewhere”—here he cast a look at me—“so that half the evening passed before I had an opportunity to join her in the so-

called alcove, where I had seen her set up her miniature court. What passed between us in the short interview we held together you will find me prepared to state, if necessary. It was chiefly marked by the one short view I succeeded in obtaining of her marvelous diamond, in spite of the pains she took to hide it from me by some natural movement whenever she caught my eyes leaving her face. But in that one short look I had seen enough. This was a gem for a collector, not to be worn save in a royal presence. How had she come by it? And could Mr. Smythe expect me to procure him a stone like that? In my confusion I arose to depart, but the lady showed a disposition to keep me, and began chatting so vivaciously that I scarcely noticed that she was all the time engaged in drawing off her gloves. Indeed, I almost forgot the jewel, possibly because her movements hid it so completely, and only remembered it when, with a sudden turn from the window where she had drawn me to watch the falling flakes, she pressed the gloves into my hand with the coquettish request that I should take care of them for her. I remember, as I took them, of striving to catch another glimpse of the stone, whose brilliancy had dazzled me, but she had opened her fan between us. A moment after, thinking I heard approaching steps, I quitted the room. This was my first visit.”

As he stopped, possibly for breath, possibly to judge to what extent I was impressed by his account, the inspector seized the opportunity to ask if Mrs. Fairbrother had been standing any of this time with her back to him. To which he answered yes, while they were in the window.

“Long enough for her to pluck off the jewel and thrust it into the gloves, if she had so wished?”

“Quite long enough.”

“But you did not see her do this?”

“I did not.”

“And so took the gloves without suspicion?”

“Entirely so.”

“And carried them away?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Without thinking that she might want them the next minute?”

“I doubt if I was thinking seriously of her at all. My thoughts were on my own disappointment.”

“Did you carry these gloves out in your hand?”

“No, in my pocket.”

“I see. And you met—”

“No one. The sound I heard must have come from the rear hall.”

“And there was nobody on the steps?”

“No. A gentleman was standing at their foot—Mr. Grey, the Englishman—but his face was turned another way, and he looked as if he had been in that same position for several minutes.”

“Did this gentleman—Mr. Grey—see you?”

“I can not say, but I doubt it. He appeared to be in a sort of dream. There were other people about, but nobody with whom I was acquainted.”

“Very good. Now for the second visit you acknowledge having paid this unfortunate lady.”

The inspector’s voice was hard. I clung a little more tightly to my uncle, and Mr. Durand, after one agonizing glance my way, drew himself up as if quite conscious that he had entered upon the most serious part of the struggle.

“I had forgotten the gloves in my hurried departure; but presently I remembered them, and grew very uneasy. I did not like carrying this woman’s property about with me. I had engaged myself, an hour before, to Miss Van Arsdale, and was very anxious to rejoin her. The gloves worried me, and finally, after a little aimless wandering through the various rooms, I determined to go back and restore them to their owner. The doors of the supper-room had just been flung open, and the end of the hall near the alcove was comparatively empty, save for a certain quizzical friend of mine, whom I saw sitting with his partner on the yellow divan. I did not want to encounter him just then, for he had already joked me about my admiration for the lady with the diamond, and so I conceived the idea of

approaching her by means of a second entrance to the alcove, unsuspected by most of those present, but perfectly well-known to me, who have been a frequent guest in this house. A door, covered by temporary draperies, connects, as you may know, this alcove with a passageway communicating directly with the hall of entrance and the up-stairs dressing-rooms. To go up the main stairs and come down by the side one, and so on, through a small archway, was a very simple matter for me. If no early-departing or late arriving guests were in that hall, I need fear but one encounter, and that was with the servant stationed at the carriage entrance. But even he was absent at this propitious instant, and I reached the door I sought without any unpleasantness. This door opened out instead of in,—this I also knew when planning this surreptitious intrusion, but, after pulling it open and reaching for the curtain, which hung completely across it, I found it not so easy to proceed as I had imagined. The stealthiness of my action held back my hand; then the faint sounds I heard within advised me that she was not alone, and that she might very readily regard with displeasure my unexpected entrance by a door of which she was possibly ignorant. I tell you all this because, if by any chance I was seen hesitating in face of that curtain, doubts might have been raised which I am anxious to dispel.” Here his eyes left my face for that of the inspector.

“It certainly had a bad look,—that I don’t deny; but I did not think of appearances then. I was too anxious to complete a task which had suddenly presented unexpected difficulties. That I listened before entering was very natural, and when I heard no voice, only something like a great sigh, I ventured to lift the curtain and step in. She was sitting, not where I had left her, but on a couch at the left of the usual entrance, her face toward me, and—you know how, Inspector. It was her last sigh I had heard. Horrified, for I had never looked on death before, much less crime, I reeled forward, meaning, I presume, to rush down the steps shouting for help, when, suddenly, something fell splashing on my shirt-front, and I saw myself marked with a stain of blood. This both frightened and bewildered me, and it was a minute or two before I had the courage to look up. When I did do so, I saw whence this drop had come. Not from her, though the red stream was pouring down the rich folds of her dress, but from a sharp needle-like instrument which had been thrust, point downward, in the open work of an antique lantern hanging near the doorway. What had happened to me might have happened to any one who chanced to be in that spot at that special moment, but I did not realize this then. Covering the splash with my hands, I edged myself back to the door by which I had entered, watching those deathful eyes and crushing under my feet the remnants of some broken china with which the carpet was bestrewn. I had no thought of her, hardly any of myself. To cross the room was all; to escape as secretly as I came, before the portiere so nearly drawn between me and the main hall should stir under the hand of some curious person entering. It was my first sight of blood; my first contact with crime, and that was what I did,—I fled.”

The last word was uttered with a gasp. Evidently he was greatly affected by this horrible experience.

“I am ashamed of myself,” he muttered, “but nothing can now undo the fact. I slid from the presence of this murdered woman as though she had been the victim of my own rage or cupidity; and, being fortunate enough to reach the dressing-room before the alarm had spread beyond the immediate vicinity of the alcove, found and put on the handkerchief, which made it possible for me to rush down and find Miss Van Arsdale, who, somebody told me, had fainted. Not till I stood over her in that remote corner beyond the supper-room did I again think of the gloves. What I did when I happened to think of them, you already know. I could have shown no greater cowardice if I had known that the murdered woman’s diamond was hidden inside them. Yet, I did not know this, or even suspect it. Nor do I understand, now, her reason for placing it there. Why should Mrs. Fairbrother risk such an invaluable gem to the custody of one she knew so little? An unconscious custody, too? Was she afraid of being murdered if she retained this jewel?”

The inspector thought a moment, and then said:

“You mention your dread of some one entering by the one door before you could escape by the other. Do you refer to the friend you left sitting on the divan opposite?”

“No, my friend had left that seat. The portiere was sufficiently drawn for me to detect that. If I had waited a minute longer,” he bitterly added, “I should have found my way open to the regular entrance, and so escaped all this.”

“Mr. Durand, you are not obliged to answer any of my questions; but, if you wish, you may tell me whether, at this moment of apprehension, you thought of the danger you ran of being seen from outside by some one of the many coachmen passing by on the driveway?”

“No,—I did not even think of the window,—I don’t know why; but, if any one passing by did see me, I hope they saw enough to substantiate my story.”

The inspector made no reply. He seemed to be thinking. I heard afterward that the curtains, looped back in the early evening, had been found hanging at full length over this window by those who first rushed in upon the scene of death. Had he hoped to entrap Mr. Durand into some damaging admission? Or was he merely testing his truth? His expression afforded no clue to his thoughts, and Mr. Durand, noting this, remarked with some dignity:

“I do not expect strangers to accept these explanations, which must sound strange and inadequate in face of the proof I carry of having been with that woman after the fatal weapon struck her heart. But, to one who knows me, and knows me well, I can surely appeal for credence to a tale which I here declare to be as true as if I had sworn to it in a court of justice.”

“Anson!” I passionately cried out, loosening my clutch upon my uncle’s arm. My confidence in him had returned.

And then, as I noted the inspector’s businesslike air, and my uncle’s wavering look and unconvinced manner, I felt my heart swell, and, flinging all discretion to the wind, I bounded eagerly forward. Laying my hands in those of Mr. Durand, I cried fervently:

“I believe in you. Nothing but your own words shall ever shake my confidence in your innocence.”

The sweet, glad look I received was my best reply. I could leave the room, after that.

But not the house. Another experience awaited me, awaited us all, before this full, eventful evening came to a close.

V. SUPERSTITION

I had gone up stairs for my wraps—my uncle having insisted on my withdrawing from a scene where my very presence seemed in some degree to compromise me.

Soon prepared for my departure, I was crossing the hall to the small door communicating with the side staircase where my uncle had promised to await me, when I felt myself seized by a desire to have another look below before leaving the place in which were centered all my deepest interests.

A wide landing, breaking up the main flight of stairs some few feet from the top, offered me an admirable point of view. With but little thought of possible consequences, and no thought at all of my poor, patient uncle, I slipped down to this landing, and, protected by the unusual height of its balustrade, allowed myself a parting glance at the scene with which my most poignant memories were henceforth to be connected.

Before me lay the large square of the central hall. Opening out from this was the corridor leading to the front door, and incidentally to the library. As my glance ran down this corridor, I beheld, approaching from the room just mentioned, the tall figure of the Englishman.

He halted as he reached the main hall and stood gazing eagerly at a group of men and women clustered near the fireplace—a group on which I no sooner cast my own eye than my attention also became fixed.

The inspector had come from the room where I had left him with Mr. Durand and was showing to these people the extraordinary diamond, which he had just recovered under such remarkable if not suspicious circumstances. Young heads and old were meeting over it, and I was straining my ears to hear such comments as were audible above the general hubbub, when Mr. Grey made a quick move and I looked his way again in time to mark his air of concern and the uncertainty he showed whether to advance or retreat.

Unconscious of my watchful eye, and noting, no doubt, that most of the persons in the group on which his own eye was leveled stood with their backs toward him, he made no effort to disguise his profound interest in the stone. His eye followed its passage from hand to hand with a covetous eagerness of which he may not have been aware, and I was not at all surprised when, after a short interval of troubled indecision, he impulsively stepped forward and begged the privilege of handling the gem himself.

Our host, who stood not far from the inspector, said something to that gentleman which led to this request being complied with. The stone was passed over to Mr. Grey, and I saw, possibly because my heart was in my eyes, that the great man's hand trembled as it touched his palm. Indeed, his whole frame trembled, and I was looking eagerly for the result of his inspection when, on his turning to hold the jewel up to the light, something happened so abnormal and so strange that no one who was fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to be present in the house at that instant will ever forget it.

This something was a cry, coming from no one knew where, which, unearthly in its shrillness and the power it had on the imagination, reverberated through the house and died away in a wail so weird, so thrilling and so prolonged that it gripped not only my own nerveless and weakened heart, but those of the ten strong men congregated below me. The diamond dropped from Mr. Grey's hand, and neither he nor any one else moved to pick it up. Not till silence had come again—a silence almost as unendurable to the sensitive ear as the cry which had preceded it—did any one stir or think of the gem. Then one gentleman after another bent to look for it, but with no success, till one of the waiters, who possibly had followed it with his eye or caught sight of its sparkle on the edge of the rug, whither it had rolled, sprang and picked it up and handed it back to Mr. Grey.

Instinctively the Englishman's hand closed on it, but it was very evident to me, and I think to all, that his interest in it was gone. If he looked at it he did not see it, for he stood like one stunned all the time that agitated men and women were running hither and thither in unavailing efforts to locate the

sound yet ringing in their ears. Not till these various searchers had all come together again, in terror of a mystery they could not solve, did he let his hand fall and himself awake to the scene about him.

The words he at once gave utterance to were as remarkable as all the rest.

“Gentlemen,” said he, “you must pardon my agitation. This cry—you need not seek its source—is one to which I am only too well accustomed. I have been the happy father of six children. Five I have buried, and, before the death of each, this same cry has echoed in my ears. I have but one child left, a daughter,—she is ill at the hotel. Do you wonder that I shrink from this note of warning, and show myself something less than a man under its influence? I am going home; but, first, one word about this stone.” Here he lifted it and bestowed, or appeared to bestow on it, an anxious scrutiny, putting on his glasses and examining it carefully before passing it back to the inspector.

“I have heard,” said he, with a change of tone which must have been noticeable to every one, “that this stone was a very superior one, and quite worthy of the fame it bore here in America. But, gentlemen, you have all been greatly deceived in it; no one more than he who was willing to commit murder for its possession. The stone, which you have just been good enough to allow me to inspect, is no diamond, but a carefully manufactured bit of paste not worth the rich and elaborate setting which has been given to it. I am sorry to be the one to say this, but I have made a study of precious stones, and I can not let this bare-faced imitation pass through my hands without a protest. Mr. Ramsdell,” this to our host, “I beg you will allow me to utter my excuses, and depart at once. My daughter is worse,—this I know, as certainly as that I am standing here. The cry you have heard is the one superstition of our family. Pray God that I find her alive!”

After this, what could be said? Though no one who had heard him, not even my own romantic self, showed any belief in this interpretation of the remarkable sound that had just gone thrilling through the house, yet, in face of his declared acceptance of it as a warning, and the fact that all efforts had failed to locate the sound, or even to determine its source, no other course seemed open but to let this distinguished man depart with the suddenness his superstitious fears demanded.

That this was in opposition to the inspector’s wishes was evident enough. Naturally, he would have preferred Mr. Grey to remain, if only to make clear his surprising conclusions in regard to a diamond which had passed through the hands of some of the best judges in the country, without a doubt having been raised as to its genuineness.

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