

Green Anna Katharine

Three Thousand Dollars



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CHAPTER I

"Do you know what would happen to him?"

NOW state your problem."

The man who was thus addressed shifted uneasily on the long bench which he and his companion bestrode. He was facing the speaker, and though very little light sifted through the cobweb-covered window high over their heads, he realized that what there was fell on his features, and he was not sure of his features, or of what effect their expression might have on the other man.

"Are you sure we are quite alone in this big, desolate place?" he asked.

It seemed a needless question. Though it was broad daylight outside and they were in the very heart of the most populated district of lower New York, they could not have been more isolated had the surrounding walls been those of some old ruin in the heart of an untraversed desert.

A short description of the place will explain this. They were in the forsaken old church not far from Avenue A —, a building long given over to desolation, and empty of everything but débris and one or two broken stalls, which for some inscrutable reason — possibly from some latent instinct of inherited reverence — had not yet been converted into junk and sold to the old clothes men by the rapacious denizens of the surrounding tenements.

Perhaps you remember this building; perhaps some echo of the bygone and romantic has come to you as you passed its decaying walls once dedicated to worship, but soulless now and only distinguishable from the five-story tenements pressing up on either side, by its one high window in which some bits of colored glass still lingered amid its twisted and battered network. You may remember the building and you may remember the stray glimpses afforded you through the arched opening in the lower story of one of the adjacent tenements, of the churchyard in its rear with its chipped and tumbling head-stones just showing here and there above the accumulated litter. But it is not probable that you have any recollections of the interior of the church itself, shut as it has been from the eye of the public for nearly a generation. And it is with the interior we have to do — a great hollow vault where once altar and priest confronted a reverent congregation. There is no altar here now, nor any chancel; hardly any floor. The timbers which held the pews have rotted and fallen away, and what was once a cellar has received all this rubbish and held it piled up in mounds which have blocked up most of the windows and robbed the place even of the dim religious light which was once its glory, so that when the man whose words we have just quoted asked if they were quite alone and peered into the dim, belumbered corners, it was but natural for his hardy, resolute, and unscrupulous companion to snort with impatience and disgust as he answered:

"Would I have brought you here if I hadn't known it was the safest place in New York for this kind of talk? Why, man, there may be in this city five men all told, who know the trick of the door I unfastened for you, and not one of them is a cop. You may take my word for that. Besides —"

"But the kids? They're everywhere; and if one of them should have followed us —"

"Do you know what would happen to him? I'll tell you a story — no, I won't; you're frightened enough already. But there's no kid here, nor any one else but our two selves, unless it be some wandering spook from the congregations laid outside; and spooks don't count. So out with your proposition, Mr. Fellows. I —"

CHAPTER II

"Thousands in that safe"

NO names!" hoarsely interrupted the other. "If you speak my name again I'll give the whole thing up."

"No you won't; you're too deep in it for that. But I'll drop the Fellows and just call you Sam. If that's too familiar, we'll drop the job. I'm not so keen on it."

"You will be. It's right in your line." Sam Fellows, as he was called, was whispering now – a hot, eager whisper, breathing of guilt and desperation. "If I could do it alone – but I haven't the wit – the –"

"Experience," dryly put in the other. "Well, well!" he exclaimed impatiently, as Fellows crept nearer, but said nothing.

"I'm going to speak, but – Well, then, here's how it is!" he suddenly conceded, warned by the other's eye. "The building is a twenty-story one, chuck full and alive with business. The room I mean is on the twelfth floor; it is one of five, all communicating, and all in constant use except the one holding the safe. And that is visited constantly. Some one is always going in and out. Indeed, it is a rule of the firm that every one of the employees must go into that room once, at least, during the day, and remain there for five minutes alone. I do it; every one does it; it's a very mysterious proceeding which only a crank like my employer would devise."

"What do you do there?"

"Nothing. I'm speaking now for myself. The others – some of the others —*one* of the others may open the safe. That's what I believe, that's what I want to know about and *how it's done*. There are thousands in that safe, and the old man being away –"

"Yes, this is all very interesting. Go on. What you want is an artist with a jimmy."

"No, no. It's no such job as that. I want to know the person, the trusted person who has all those securities within touch. It's a mania with me. I should have been the man. I'm – I'm *manager*."

The hoarseness with which this word was uttered, the instinct of shame which made his eyes fall as it struggled from his lips, wakened a curious little gleam of hardy cynicism in the steady gaze of his listener.

"Oh, you're manager, are you!" came in slow retort, filling a silence that had more of pain than pleasure in it. "Well, manager, your story is very interesting, but by no means complete. Suppose you hurry on to the next instalment."

Cringing as from a blow, Fellows took up his tale, no longer creeping nearer his would-be confederate, but, if anything, edging away.

CHAPTER III

"*How does it stand*"

"I'VE watched and watched and watched," said he, "but I can't pick out the man. Letters come, orders are given, and those orders are carried out, but *not by me*. I'm speaking now of investments, or the payment of large sums; anything which calls for the opening of that safe where the old man has stuffed away his thousands. Small matters fall to my share. There is another safe, of which I hold the combination. Child's play, but the other! It would make both of us independent, and yet leave something for appearances. But it can't be worked. It stands in front of a glass door from which the curtain is drawn every night. Every passerby can look in. If it is opened it must be done in broad daylight and by the person whom the old man trusts. By that means only would I get my revenge, and revenge is what I want. He don't trust me, *me* who have been with him for seven years and – "

"Drop that, it isn't interesting. The facts are what I want. What kind of safe is it?"

"The strangest you ever saw. I don't know who made it. There's nothing on it to show. Nor is there a lock or combination. But it opens. You can just see the outline of a door. Steel – fine steel, and not so very large, but the contents – "

"We'll take its contents for granted. How does it stand? On a platform?"

"Yes, one foot from the floor. The platform runs all the way across the room and holds other things; a table which nobody uses, a revolving bookcase and a series of shelves, fitted with boxes containing old receipts and such junk. Sometimes I go through these; but nothing ever comes of it." He paused, as if the subject were distasteful.

"And the safe is opened?"

"Almost every week. I'm ashamed to tell you the old duffer's methods; they're loony. But he isn't a lunatic. At any rate, they don't think so in Wall Street."

"I'll make a guess at his name."

"Not yet. You'll have to swear – "

"Oh, we're both in it. Never mind the heroics. It's too good a thing to peach on. Me and the manager! I like that. Take it easy till the job's done, anyway. And now I'll take a fly at the name. It's – "

He had the grace to whisper.

CHAPTER IV

"*Stenographers must be counted*"

YOUNG Fellows squirmed and turned a shade paler, if one could trust the sickly violet ray that shot down from the once exquisitely colored window high up over their heads.

"Hush!" he muttered; and the other grinned. Evidently the guess was a correct one.

"No, he's no lunatic," the professional quietly declared. "But he has queer ways. Which of his queers do you object to?"

"When his letters come, or more often his cablegrams, they are opened by me and then put in plain view on a certain little bulletin board in the main office. These are his orders. Any one who knows the cipher can read them. I don't know the cipher. At night I take them down, number them, and file them away. They have served their purpose. They have been seen by the person whose business it is to carry out his instructions, and the rest you must guess. His brokers know the secret, but it is never discussed by us. The least word and the next cablegram would read in good plain English, 'Fire him!' I've had that experience. I've had to fire three since he went away two months ago."

"That's good."

"Why good?"

"That cuts out three from your list. *The person is not among the ones dismissed.*"

"That's so." New life seemed to spring up in Fellows. "You'll do the job," he cried. "Somehow, I never thought of going about it that way. And I know another man that's out."

"Who?"

"Myself, for one. There are only seven more."

"Counting all?"

"All."

"Stenographers included?"

"Oh, stenographers!"

"Stenographers must be counted."

"Well, then, seven men and one woman. Our stenographer is a woman."

"What kind of a woman?"

"A young girl. Ordinary, but good enough. I've never noticed her very much."

"Tell me about the men."

"What's the use? You wouldn't take my word. They're a cheap lot, beneath contempt in my estimation. There's not one of them clever enough for the business. Jack Forbush comes the nearest to it, and probably is the one. The way he keeps his eye on me makes me suspect him. Or is he, too, playing my game?"

"How can I tell? How can I tell anything from what you say? I'll have to look into the matter myself. Give me the names and addresses and I'll look the parties up. Get their rating, so to speak. Leave it to me, and I'll land the old man's confidential clerk."

"Here's the list. I thought you might want it."

"Where's the girl's name?"

"The girl! Oh, pshaw!"

"Put her name down just the same."

"There, then. Grace Lee. Address, 74 East – Street. And now swear on the honor of a gentleman

– "

Beau Johnson pulled the rim of Fellows's hat over his eyes to suggest what he thought of this demand.

CHAPTER V

"I've business with him"

NEXT day there appeared at the offices of Thomas Stoughton, in Nassau Street, a trim, well-looking man, who had urgent business with Mr. Fellows, the manager. He was kept waiting for some time before being introduced into that gentleman's private room; but this did not seem to disturb him. There was plenty to look at, or so he seemed to think, and his keen, noncommittal eyes flashed hither and thither and from face to face with restless activity. He seemed particularly interested in the bookkeeper of the establishment, but it was an interest which did not last long, and when a neat, pleasant-faced young woman rose from her seat and passed rapidly across the room, it was upon her his eyes settled and remained fixed, with a growing attention, until a certain door closed upon her with a sound like a snapping lock. Then he transferred his attention to the door, and was still gazing at it when a boy summoned him to the manager's office.

He went in with reluctance. He had rather have watched that door. But he had questions to ask, and so made a virtue of necessity. Mr. Fellows was not pleased to see him. He started quite guiltily from his seat and only sat again on compulsion – the compulsion of his visitor's steady and quelling eye.

"I've business with you, Mr. Fellows." Then, the boy being gone, "Which is the room? The one opening out of the general office directly opposite this?"

Mr. Fellows nodded.

"I have just seen one of the employees go in there. I should like to see that person come out. Do you mind talking with this door open? I know enough about banking to hold up my end of the conversation."

Fellows rose with a jerk and pushed the door back. His visitor smiled easily and launched into a discussion about stocks and bonds interspersed with a few assertions and questions not meant for the general ear, as:

"It's the girl who is in there. Not ordinary, by any means. Just the sort an old smudge like Stoughton would be apt to trust. Now what's that?"

"Singing. She often sings. I've forbidden it, but she forgets, she says," answered Fellows.

"Pretty good music. Listen to that note. High as a prima donna's. Does she sing at her work?"

"No; I'd fire her if she did. It's only when she's walking about or when–"

"She's in that room?"

"Yes."

"At par? I buy nothing at par. There! She's coming. I wish I dared intercept her, rifle her pockets. Do you know if she has pockets?"

"No; how should I?"

"Fellows, you're not worth your salt. Ah! there's a face for you, and I can read it like a book. Did a letter or cablegram come to-day?"

"Yes; didn't you see it? Hung up in the outer office."

"I thought I saw something. Ninety-five? That's a quotation worth listening to. Three at ninety-five. That girl's a trump. I will see more of my lady." Here he took care to shut the door. "I've been the rounds, Fellows. Private-detective work and all that. She is the only puzzler among the group. You'll hear from me again; meanwhile treat the girl well. Don't spring any traps; leave that to me."

And Fellows, panting with excitement, promised, muttering under his breath:

"A woman! That's even worse than I thought. But we'll make the old fellow pay for it. Those securities are ours. I already feel them in my hand."

The sinister twitch which marred the other's mouth emphasized the assertion in a way Grace Lee's friends would have trembled to see.

CHAPTER VI

"If I could tell you his story"

THAT evening a young woman and a young man sat on one of the benches in Central Park. They were holding hands, but modestly and with a clinging affection. No one appeared in sight; they had the moon-light, the fragrance of the spring foliage, and their true love all to themselves. The woman was Grace, the young man was Philip Andrews, a candid-eyed, whole-hearted fellow whom any girl might be proud to be seen with, much more to be engaged to. Grace was proud, but she was more than that; her heart was all involved in her hope – a good heart which he was equally proud to have won. Yet while love was theirs and the surroundings breathed peace and joy, they did not look quite happy. A cloud was on his brow and something like a tear in her eye as she spoke gently but with rare firmness.

"Philip, we must wait. One love does not put out another. I cannot leave my old father now. He is too feeble and much too dependent on me. Philip, you do not know my father. You have seen him, it is true, many, many times. You have talked with him and even have nursed him at odd moments, when I had to be out of the room getting supper or supplying some of his many wants. Yet you do not know him."

"I know that he is intelligent."

"Yes, yes, that is evident. Any one can see that. And you can see, too, that he is frequently fretful and exacting, as all old people are. But the qualities he shows me – his strong, melancholy, but devoted nature, quickened by an unusually unhappy life – that you do not see and cannot, much as you like him and much as he likes you. Only the child who has surprised him at odd moments, when he thought himself quite alone, wringing his hands and weeping over some intolerable memory – who has listened in the dead of night to his smothered but heart-breaking groans, can know either his suffering or the one joy which palliates it. If I could tell you his story – but that would be treason to one whose rights I am bound to reverence. You will respect my silence, but you must also take my word that he needs and has a right to all the pleasure and all the hope my love can give him. I cannot be with him much; my work forbids, but the little time I have is his, except on rare occasions like this, and he knows it and is satisfied. Were I married – . But you will wait, Philip. It may not be long – he grows weaker every day. Besides, you are not ready yet yourself. You are doing wonderfully well, but a year's freedom will help you materially, as it will me. Every day is adding to our store; in a year we may be almost independent."

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