

The House of the Whispering

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

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PROLOGUE

English detective stories have waxed and their want in public favor, their American imitations hold the readers' attention for a time; French and German acuteness in the devising of original plots engages our interest until the tales of newer authors are told, but Anna Katharine Green's detective stories, based on incidents of American life, are perennial bloomers. They know no permanent rivals. In the writing of stories with originality of plot, skillful delineation of character, interest of incident, intricacy of mystery and boldness of denouement no foreign novelist can hope to compete for American favor with an American woman writer.

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CHAPTER I

THE HESITANT STEP.

THE moon rode high, but ominous clouds were rushing toward it—clouds heavy with snow. I watched these clouds drive recklessly, desperately over the winter roads. I had just passed the desire of my life, the one precious treasure which I coveted with my whole undisciplined heart. I did not know that you call a man self-restraint. I was chafed by my defeat far beyond the bounds I have usually set for myself.

I rode on, hardly conscious of my surroundings, till the rapid recurrence of several well known landmarks warned me that I had taken the longest route and that in another moment I should be skirting the grounds of the "Whispering Pines," our country club-house. The season was over and the clubhouse closed, and when the great lack of chimney smoke suddenly to view against the broad disk of the still unclouded moon, I perceived this trail of smoke soaring up from their midst I realized with a shock that there should be no such sign of life in a house I myself had closed, locked and barred that very day.

I was the president of the club and it was my duty to see that the clubhouse was closed and locked and that all was not as it should be inside these walls.

Our clubhouse stands, as it may be necessary to remind you, on a knoll thickly wooded with the ancient trees I have mentioned. These trees—all lines and of a growth unusual and of an aspect well nigh hoary—extend only to the rear end of the house, where a wide stretch of gently undulating ground opens at once upon the eyes, suggesting to all lovers of golf the admirable use to which it is put from early spring to latest fall. Now links as well as parterres and driveways were lying under an even blanket of winter snow. No other building stood with a half mile in any direction.

I felt the isolation, as I stepped from the edge of the trees and prepared to cross the few feet of open space leading to the main door. In some moods I should have paused and thought twice before attempting the door, behind which in the dark lurked the unknown with its naturally accompanying suggestion of peril. But rage and disappointment, working both within me, had left no space for fear. Rather rejoicing in the doubtfulness of the adventure, I pushed my way over the snow until my feet struck the steps. Here instinct caused me to stop and glance quickly up and down the building either way. Not a gleam of light met my eye from the smallest scintillating pane. Was the house as soundless as it was dark?

I listened, but heard nothing. I listened again and still heard nothing. Then I proceeded boldly up the steps and laid my hand on the door.

It was unwatched and yielded to my touch. Light or no light, sound or no sound, there was some one within. The fire which had sent its attenuated streak of smoke up into the moonlight was burning yet on one of the many hearths within. I proceeded to enter and close the door carefully behind me. As I did so I cast an involuntary glance without. The sky was dark, and a few wandering flakes of

the now rapidly advancing storm came whirling in, biting my cheeks and stinging my forehead.

Once inside I stopped short, possibly to listen again, possibly to assure myself as to what I had best do next. The silence was profound. Not a sound disturbed the great, empty building. My own footfall as I stirred seemed to wake extraordinary echoes. I had moved but a few steps, yet to my heightened senses the noise seemed loud enough to wake the dead. Instinctively I stopped and stood stock still. There was no answering cessation of movement, darkness, silence everywhere. Yet not quite absolute darkness. As my eyes grew accustomed to the place I found it possible to discern the outlines of the windows and locate the stairs and the arches where the side halls opened. I was even able to pick out the exact spot where the great antlers spread themselves above the hat rack, and presently the rack itself came into view, with its row of empty peaks, yesterday so full, today quite empty. That rack interested me, I hardly knew why, and regardless of the noise I made I crossed over to it and ran my hand along the wall underneath. The result was startling. A man's coat and hat hung from one of the pegs.

Would this hat and coat identify the intruder? I would strike a light and see. But this involved difficulties. The gas had been turned off that very morning, and I had no matches in my pocket. But I remembered where they could be found. I had seen them when I passed through the kitchen earlier in the day.

I began to move that way and presently came creeping back with a matchbox half full of matches in my hand. But I did not strike one then. I had just made a move to do so when the unmistakable sound of a door opening somewhere in the house made me draw back into as quiet and dark a place as I could find. This lay in the rear and at the right of the staircase, and as the sound had appeared to come from above it was the most natural retreat that offered. And a good one I found it.

I had hardly taken up my stand when the darkness above gave way to a faint glimmer and a step became audible coming from some one of the many small rooms in the second story, but slowly and with evident hesitation.

The light steadily increased with each lagging but surely advancing step. Then the uncertain step paused, and a sob came faintly to my ears, wrung from lips stiff with human anguish. The sound of the sigh struck shudderingly on my ear, followed by the renewal of the step and the almost immediate appearance on the stairs of a beautiful young girl of seventeen, holding a candle in one hand and shielding her face with the other.

Nothing could have prepared me for an encounter with this woman anywhere that night after what had

of me, and I heard her groping about, then give a sudden spring toward the front door. It opened, and the wind sighed in. I felt the chill of snow upon my face and realized the tempest. Then all was quiet and dark again. She had slid quickly out, and the door had swung to behind her.

Another instant and I heard the click of the key as it turned in the lock, heard it and made no outcry, such the spell, such the bewilderment, of my faculties! Then I felt all lesser emotions give way to an anxiety which demanded immediate action, for the girl had gone out without wraps or covering for her head, and my experience of the evening had told me how cold it was. I must follow and find her and rescue her if possible from the snow.

Throwing myself against the door, I shook it violently. It was immovable. Then I flew to the windows. Their fastenings yielded readily enough, but not the windows themselves. One had a broken cord, another seemed glued to its frame, and I was still struggling with the latter when I heard a sound which lifted the hair on my head and turned my whole attention back to what lay behind and above me. There was still some one in the house. To find Carmel Cumberland alone in this desolation was a mystifying discovery to which I had found it hard enough to reconcile myself. But I was here in company with an unknown another at the very moment when I had expected the fruition of my own joy—ah, that was to open her door in my breast, a possibility too intolerable to remain unsettled for an instant.

Leaving the window, I groped my way along the wall until I reached the rack where the man's coat and hat had hung. Nothing was hanging from the rack. The wall was hung from end to end. She had taken these articles of male apparel with her; she had not gone forth into the driving snow unprotected, but—

I did not know what to think. The groping she had done had been in this direction. She was searching for this hat and coat! A man's hat, a derby, as I had been careful to assure myself at the first handling, and in them she had gone home as she had probably come, and there was no man in the case, or if there were—

The doubt drove me to the staircase. I began my wary ascent. I had not the slightest fear. I was too full of cold rage for that.

The arrangement of rooms on the second floor was well known to me. I understood every nook and corner and could find my way about the whole place without a light. I took but one precaution, that of slipping off my shoes at the foot of the stairs. I wished to surprise the intruder. I was willing to resort to any expedient to accomplish this. The matches I carried in my pocket would make this possible if once I heard him breathing. I held my own breath as I stole softly up and waited for an instant at the top of the stairs to listen. There was an awesome silence everywhere, and I was hesitating whether to attack the front rooms first or to follow up a certain narrow hall leading to a rear staircase when I remembered the thin line of smoke which, rising from one of the chimneys, had first attracted my attention to the house. In that was my clue.

I knew that there was but one room on this floor where a fire could be lit. It lay a few feet beyond me down the narrow hall I have just mentioned. Why had I trusted everything to my ears when my nose would have been a better guide? As I took the few steps necessary a slight smell of smoke became very perceptible, and no longer in doubt of my course, I pushed boldly on and, entering the half open door, struck a match and peered anxiously about.

Emptiness here just as everywhere else, a few chairs, a dresser—it was a ladies' dressing room—some smoldering ashes on the hearth, a lounge piled up with cushions, but no person. The sound I had heard had not issued from this room, yet something withheld me from seeking further. I paused just inside the door and when the match went out in my hand remained shivering there in the darkness, a prey to sensations more nearly approaching those of fear than any I had ever before experienced in my whole life.

Why I did not know. There seemed to be no reason for this excess of feeling. I had no dread of attack. My apprehension was of another sort. Besides, any attack here must come from the rear—from the open doorway in which I stood—and my dread lay before me, in the room itself, which, as I have already said, appeared to be totally empty. I had forgotten the intruder. The interest which had carried me thus far had become lost in a fresher one of which the beginning and ending lay hidden within the four walls I now stared upon, unseeing. Not to see and yet to feel—did that make me better? If so another lighted match must help me out. I struck one while the thought was hot within me and again took a look at the room.

I noted but one thing new, but that made me reel back till I was half-way into the hall. Then a certain dogged persistency I possess came to my rescue, and I re-entered the room at a leap and stood before the lounge and its pile of cushions. They were numerous—all that the room contained and more. Chairs had been stripped, window seats denuded and the whole collection disposed here in a set way which struck me as unnatural.

But at this point my second match went out.

Thoroughly roused now (you will say by what?) I felt my way out of the room and to the head of the staircase. I remembered the candle and candlestick I had heard thrown down on the lower floor by Carmel Cumberland. I would secure them and come back and settle these uncanny doubts. I had a hunt for the candlestick and a still longer one for the candle, but finally I recovered both and, lighting the latter, felt myself, for the first time more or less master of the situation.

Rapidly regaining the room in which my interest was now centered, I set the candlestick down on the dresser and approached the lounge. Hardly knowing what I feared or what I expected to find, I tore off one of the cushions and flung it behind me. More cushions were revealed, but that was not all.

Escaping from the edge of one of them I saw a shiny tress of woman's hair. I gave a gasp and pulled off more cushions. Then I fell on my knees, struck down by the greatest horror which a man can feel. Death lay before me—violent, uncalled for death—and the victim was a woman.

It was she—she indeed. Dead—Adelaide, the woman I had planned to marry that very night and who had thus wronged me! For a moment I could take in nothing but this one astounding fact; then the how and why woke in maddening curiosity within me.

But beyond the ever accusing, protruberant stare those features told nothing, and, steeling myself to the situation, I made what observation I could of her condition and the surroundings.



DEATH LAY BEFORE ME.

rounding circumstances, for this was my betrothed wife. Whatever my intentions, however far my love had strayed under the spell cast over me by her sister—the young girl who had just passed out—Adelaide and I had been engaged for many months. Our wedding day was even set.

But that was all over now—ended, as her life was ended, suddenly, incomprehensibly and by no stroke of God. Even the jewel on her finger was gone, the token of our betrothal. This was to be expected. She would be apt to take it off before committing herself to a fate that proclaimed me a traitor to this symbol. I should see that ring again. I should find it in a letter filled with bitter words. I would not think of it or of them now. I would try to learn how she had committed this act, whether by poison or—

It must have been by poison. No other means would suggest themselves to one of her refined sense. But if so why those marks on her neck, growing darker and darker as I stared at them?

My senses reeled as I scrutinized those marks. Small, delicate, but deadly, they stared upon me from either side of her white neck till nature could endure no more, and I tottered back against the farther wall, beholding no longer room nor lounge nor recumbent body, but a young girl's exquisite face, set in lines which belied her seventeen years and made futile any attempt on my part at self-deception when my reason inexorably demanded an explanation of this death. As suicide it was comprehensible, as murder not, unless—

And it had been murder!

I sank to the floor as I fully realized this.

CHAPTER II

"OPEN!"

I HAVE mentioned poison as my first thought. It was a natural one, the result undoubtedly of having noticed two small cordial glasses standing on a little table over against the fireplace. When I was conscious again of my own fears I crossed to the table and peered into these glasses. They were not club glasses, and they both were empty. However, they had not been so long. In each I found traces of aniseed cordial, and, though no bottle stood near, I was very confident that it could readily be found somewhere in the room. What had preceded and followed the drinking of this cordial?

Alas, there was but little more to see! A pair of curling irons lay on the hearth, but I had no sooner lifted them than I dropped them with a sound of unpeppable loathing, only to start at the noise they made in striking the tiles, for it was the selfsame noise I had heard when listening from below. These tongs, set up against the side of the fireplace, had been jarred down by the forcible shutting of the large front door, and no man other than myself was in the house or had been in the house—only the two women. A stick or two still smoldered on the hearthstone. In the ashes lay some scattered fragments of paper which crumbled at my touch. On the floor in front I espied only a stray hairpin. Everything else was in place throughout the room except the cushions and that horror on the lounge, waiting the second look I had so far refrained from giving it.

That look I could no longer withhold. I must know the depth of the grief over which I hung. I must not wrong with a thought one who had smiled upon me like an angel of light—a young girl, too, with the dew of innocence on her beauty to every eye but mine and only not to mine within—shall I say ten awful minutes? I would look again and perhaps discover that my own eyes had been at fault; that there were no marks on Adelaide's throat, or, if marks, not just the ones my fancy had painted there.

Turning, I let my glance fall first on the feet. I had not noted them before, and I was startled to see that the articles in which they were clad were filled all around with snow. She had walked then as the other was walking now—she who detested every effort and was of such delicate make that exertion of unusual kind could not readily be associated with her. Had she come alone or in Carmel's company, and, if in Carmel's company, on what ostensible errand if not that of death? Her dress, which was of dark wool, showed that she had changed her garments for this trip. I had seen her at dinner, and this was not the gown she had worn then—the gown in which she had confronted me during those few intolerable minutes when I could not meet her eyes. Nothing spoke of the dinner party or of her having been dragged here unaware, but all of previous intent and premeditation. Surely

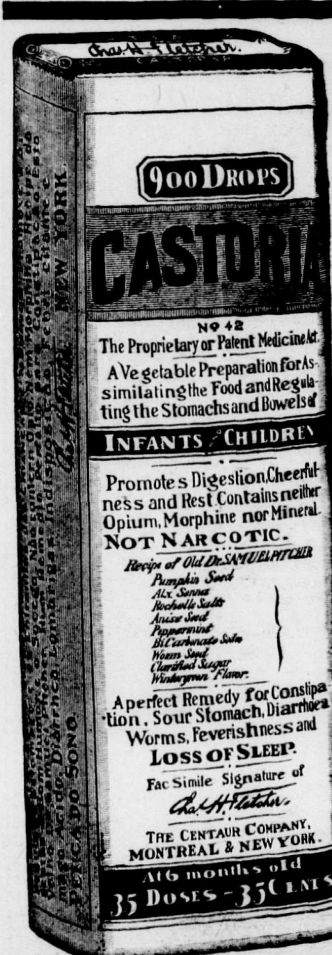
she was getting uppermost. If I had dreamed the marks—

But, no! There they were, unmistakable and damning, just where the breath struggles up. I put my own thumb on these two dark spots to see if when—What was it? Lightning strokes or a call of fate which I must answer while sense remains? I felt my head pulled around by some unseen force from behind and not staring into mine through the glass of the window a pair of burning eyes. Or was it fantasy? For in another moment they were gone. But the possibility of a person having seen me in this position before the dead was enough to startle me to my feet, and, though in another instant I became convinced that I had been the victim of hallucination, I nevertheless made haste to cross to the window and take a look through its dismal panes. A gleam of blinding snow was sweeping past, making all things halcyonable, but the absence of balcony outside was reassuring, and I stopped hastily back, asking myself for the first time what I should do and when I should now go to insure myself from being called as a witness to the awful occurrence which had just taken place in this house. Something I must do to save myself the anguish and Carmel the danger of my testimony in this matter. She must never know, the world must never know, that I had seen her here.

I could not be the death of two women. The loss of one weighed heavily enough upon my conscience. I would fly the place—I would leave this ghastly find to tell its own story. The night was stormy, the hour late, the spot a remote one and the road to it but little used. I could easily escape, and when the morning came—But it was the present I must think of now—this hour, this moment. How came I to stay so long? In feverish haste I began to throw the pillows back over the quiet limbs, the accusing face. Shudderingly I hid those eyes (I understood their strange protrusion now) and, recklessly bent on flight, was halfway across the door when my feet were stayed—I wonder my reason was not unseated—by a sudden and tremendous attack on the great door below, mingled with loud cries to open which rang thundering through the house, calling up innumerable echoes from its dead and hidden corners.

It was the police. The wild night, the biting storm, had been of no avail. An alarm had reached headquarters, and all hope of escape on my part was at an end. Yet, because at such crises instinct rises superior to reason, I blew out the candle and softly made my way into the hall. I had remembered the window opening over a shed at the head of the kitchen staircase. I could reach it from this rear hall by just a turn or two, and once on that shed a short leap would land me on the ground, after which I could easily trust to the storm to conceal my flight across the open golf links. It was worth trying, at least. Anything was better than being found in the house with my murdered being.

(Continued on page 8)



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