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THE LEAVENWORTH CASE

By A. K. Green.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

THE LEAVENWORTH MURDER.

Latest Developments in the Mysterious Case.

A Member of the Murdered Man's Own Family Strongly Suspected of the Crime.

The most beautiful woman in New York under a cloud.

Past History of Miss Eleanore Leavenworth.

"What does it mean?" she gasped; "what, what does it mean? Is the world mad?" and her eyes, fixed and glassy, stared into mine as if she found it impossible to grasp the sense of this outrage.

I shook my head, I could not reply.

"To accuse me," she murmured; "me, me," striking her breast with her clenched hand; "who loved the very ground he trod upon, who would have cast my own body between him and the deadly bullet if I had only known his danger. Oh," cried she, "it is not a slander they utter, but a dagger which they thrust into my heart!"

Overcome by this, but determined not to show my compassion until more thoroughly convinced of her complete innocence, I replied, after a pause:

"This seems to strike you with great surprise, Miss Leavenworth; were you not, then, able to foresee what must follow your determined reticence upon certain points? Did you know so little of human nature as to imagine that, situated as you are, you could keep silence in regard to any matter connected with this crime without arousing the antagonism of the crowd, to say nothing of the suspicions of the police? When you defied the coroner to find any suspicious paper in your possession; when—I forced myself to speak—you refused to tell Mr. Gryce how you came in possession of the key—"

She drew hastily back, a heavy pall seemed to fall over her with my words.

"Don't!" she whispered, looking agonizedly about her. "Don't! Sometimes I think the walls have ears, the very shadows seem to listen."

"Ah," returned I, "do you, then, hope to keep from the world what is known to the detectives? Miss Leavenworth," I went on, "I am afraid that you do not comprehend your position. Try to look at the case for a moment in the light of an unprejudiced person; try to see for yourself the necessity of explaining—"

"But I cannot explain!" she murmured, huskily.

"Cannot!"

I do not know whether it was the tone of my voice, or the word itself, but that simple expression seemed to affect her like a blow upon the face.

"Oh!" she cried, shrinking back, "you do not, cannot doubt me too? I thought that you—" and stopped. "I did not dream that I—" and stopped again. Suddenly her whole form quivered. "Oh, I see," she murmured, "you have mistrusted me from the first; the appearances against me have been too strong. Ah, but now I am forsaken!"

The appeal went to my heart. Starting forward, I exclaimed: "Miss Leavenworth, I am but a man; I cannot see you so distressed. Say that you are innocent, and I will believe you, without regard to appearance."

Springing erect, she towered upon me. "Can anyone look in my face and accuse me of guilt?" Then as I sadly shook my head, she gasped, "You want further proof!" and sprang to the door.

"Come, then," she cried: "come!" her eyes flashing full of resolve upon me. I crossed the room to where she stood, but she was already in the hall. Hastening after her, I stood at the foot of the stairs; she was half-way to the top. Following her into the hall above, I saw her form standing erect and noble at the door of her uncle's bedroom.

"Come!" she again cried, but this time in a calm and reverential tone; and flinging the door open before her she passed in.

There was no light in the room of death, but the flame of the gas-burner at the far end of the hall shone weirdly in, and by its glimmering I beheld her kneeling at the shrouded bed, her head bowed

above that of the murdered man, her hand upon his breast.

"You have said that if I declared my innocence you would believe me," exclaimed she, lifting her head as I entered. "See here," and laying her cheek against the pallid brow of her dead benefactor, she kissed the clay-cold lips softly, wildly, agonizedly, then leaping to her feet, cried in a subdued, but thrilling tone, "Could I do that if I were guilty? Would not the breath freeze on my lips, the blood congeal in my veins, the life faint away at my heart? Son of a father loved and revered, can you believe me to be a woman stained with crime, when I can do this?" and kneeling again she cast her arms over and about that inanimate form, looking in my face at the same time with an expression no mortal touch could paint, nor tongue describe.

"In olden times," she went on, "they used to say that a dead body would bleed if its murderer came in contact with it. What then would happen here if I, his daughter, his cherished child, loaded with benefits, enriched with his jewels, warm with his kisses, should be the thing they accuse me of? Would not the body of the outraged dead burst its very shroud and repel me?"

I could not answer; in the presence of some scenes, the tongue forgets its functions.

"Oh!" she went on, "if there is a God in heaven who loves justice and hates a crime, let him hear me now. If I, by thought or action, with or without intention, have been the means of bringing this dear head to this pass; if so much as the shadow of guilt, let alone the substance, lies upon my heart and across these feeble woman's hands, may his wrath speak in righteous retribution to the world, and here upon the breast of the dead let this guilty forehead fall never to rise again!"

An awed silence followed this invocation. It seemed to me as if the world stood still to listen; then a long, long sigh of utter relief rose tremulously from my breast, and all the feelings hitherto suppressed in my heart burst their bonds, and leaning toward her I took her hand in mine.

"You do not, cannot believe me tainted by crime now?" she whispered, the smile which does not stir the lips, but rather emanates from the countenance like the flowering of an inner peace, breaking softly out on cheek and brow.

"Crime!" the word broke uncontrollably from my lips; "crime!"

"No," she said calmly, "the man does not live who could accuse me of aught, here."

For reply, I took her hand which lay in mine, and placed it on the breast of the dead.

Softly, slowly, gratefully she bowed her head.

"Now let the struggle come," she whispered. "There is one who will believe in me, however dark appearances may be."

CHAPTER XIII.

The Problem.

When we re-entered the parlor below, the first sight that met our eyes was Mary, standing wrapped in her long cloak in the center of the room. She had arrived during our absence, and now awaited us with lifted head and countenance fixed in its proudest expression. Looking in her face, I realized what the embarrassment of this meeting must be to these women, and would have retreated, but something in the attitude of Mary Leavenworth seemed to forbid my doing so. I stepped forward, and bowing to Mary, said:

"Your cousin has just succeeded in doing what you have expressed yourself so desirous of accomplishing, Miss Leavenworth; convinced me of her entire innocence in regard to this whole matter. I am now ready to join Mr. Gryce heart and soul in finding out the true culprit."

"I should have thought that it would have been sufficient for anyone to have looked Eleanore Leavenworth in the face to know her guiltless of crime." And lifting her head with a proud gesture, she fixed her eyes steadfastly on mine.

I felt the blood flash to my brow, but before I could speak, her voice rose again still more coldly than before.

"It is hard for a delicate girl, reared in the lap of love and luxury, unused to aught but adulation and sincerest expressions of regard, to be obliged to assure the world of her innocence in

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