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The Woman in the Alcove

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

Author of "The Millionaire Baby," "The Filligree Ball," "The Leavenworth Case," Etc., Etc.

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Yet my comfort was small and the effort it took to face Mr. Grey and my young patient was much greater than I had anticipated. I blushed as I approached to take my place at Miss Grey's bedside, and had her father been as suspicious of me at that moment as I was of him, I am sure that I should have fared badly in his thoughts.

But he was not on the watch for my emotions. He was simply relieved to see me back. I noticed this immediately, also that something had occurred during my absence which absorbed his thought and filled him with anxiety.

A Western Union envelope lay at his feet—proof that he had just received a telegram. This, under ordinary circumstances, would have occasioned me a second thought, such a man being naturally the recipient of all sorts of communications from all parts of the world; but at this crisis, with the worm of half-stifled doubt still gnawing at my heart, everything that occurred to him took on importance and roused questions.

When he had left the room, Miss Grey nestled up to me with the seemingly ingenuous remark:

"Poor papa! Something disturbs him. He will not tell me what. I suppose he thinks I am not strong enough to share his troubles. But I shall be soon. Don't you see I am gaining every day?"

"Indeed I do," was my hearty response. In face of such a sweet confidence and open affection doubt vanished and I was able to give my thoughts to her.

"I wish papa felt as sure of this as you do," she said. "For some reason he does not seem to take any comfort from my improvement. When Dr. Freligh says, 'Well, well! we are getting on finely today,' I notice that he does not look less anxious, nor does he smile. Haven't you noticed it?"

He looks as careworn and troubled about me now as he did the first day I was taken sick. Why should he? Is it because he has lost so many children he cannot believe in his good fortune at having the most insignificant of all left to him?"

"I do not know your father very well," I protested; "and cannot judge what is going on in his mind. But he must see that you are quite a different girl from what you were a week ago, and that if nothing unforeseen happens, your recovery will only be a matter of a week or two longer."

"Oh, how I love to hear you say that! To be well again! To read letters!" she murmured, "and to write them!" And I saw the delicate hand falter up to pinch the precious packet awaiting that happy hour. I did not like to discuss her father with her, so took this opportunity to turn the conversation aside into safer channels. But we had not proceeded far before Mr. Grey returned, and, taking his stand at the foot of the bed, remarked, after a moment's gloomy contemplation of his daughter's face:

"You are better today, the doctor says—I have just been telephoning to him. But do you feel well enough for me to leave you for a few days? There is a man I must see—must go to, if you have no read being left alone with your good nurse and the doctor's constant attendance."

Miss Grey looked startled. Doubtless she found it difficult to understand what man in this strange country could interest her father enough to induce him to leave her while he was yet laboring under such solicitude. But a smile speedily took the place of her look of surprised inquiry and she affectionately exclaimed:

"Oh, I haven't the least dread in the world, not now. See, I can hold up my arms. Go, papa, go; it will give me a chance to surprise you with my good looks when you come back."

He turned abruptly away. He was suffering from an emotion deeper than he cared to acknowledge. But he gained control over himself speedily and, coming back, announced with forced decision:

"I shall have to go tonight. I have no choice. Promise me that you will not go back in my absence; that you will strive to get well; that you will put your mind into striving to get well."

"Indeed, will," she answered, little frightened by the feeling he showed. "Don't worry so much. I have more than one reason for living, papa."

He shook his head and went immediately to make his preparations for departure. His daughter gave one sob, then caught me by the hand.

"You look dumfounded," she said. "But never mind, we shall get on very well together. I have the most perfect confidence in you."

Was it my duty to let the inspector know that Mr. Grey anticipated acknowledging himself from the city for a few days? I decided that I would only be impressing my own doubts upon him after a rebuke which should have allayed them.

Yet, when Mr. Grey came to take his departure I wished that the inspector might have been a witness to his emotion, if only to give me one of his very excellent explanations. The parting was more like that of one who sees no immediate promise of return than of a traveler who intends to limit his stay to a few days. He looked her in the eyes and kissed her a dozen times, each time with an air of heart-break which was good neither for her nor for himself, and when he finally tore himself away it was to look back at her from the door with an expression I was glad she did not see, or it would certainly have interfered with the promise she had made to concentrate all her energies on getting well.

What was at the root of his extreme grief at leaving her? Did he fear the person he was going to meet, or were his plans such as involved a much longer stay than he had mentioned? Did he even mean to return at all?

Ah, that was the question! Did he mean to return, or had I been the unconscious witness of a flight?

CHAPTER XVII.
Sweetwater in a New Role.

A few days later three men were closeted in the district attorney's office. Two of them were officials—the district attorney himself, and our old friend, the inspector. The third was the detective, Sweetwater, chosen by them to keep watch on Mr. Grey.

Sweetwater had just come to town—this was evident from the gripack he had set down in a corner on entering, also from a certain tumbled appearance which bespoke hasty rising and but few facilities for proper attention to his person. These details counted little, however, in the astonishment created by his manner. For a hardy chap he looked strangely nervous and indisposed, so much so that, after the first short greeting, the inspector asked him what was up, and if he had had another Fairbrother-house experience.

He replied with a decided no; that it was not his adventure which had upset him, but the news he had to bring.

Here he glanced at every door and window; and then, leaning forward over the table at which the two officials sat, he brought his head as nearly to them as possible and whispered five words.

They produced a most unhappy sensation. Both the men, hardened as they were by duties which soon sap the sensibilities, started and turned as pale as the speaker himself. Then the district attorney, with one glance at the inspector, rose and locked the door.

It was a prelude to the tale which I give, not as it came from his mouth, but as it was afterward related to me. The language, I fear, is mostly my own.

The detective had just been with Mr. Grey to the coast of Maine. Why there, will presently appear. His task had been to follow this gentleman, and follow him he did.

Mr. Grey was a very stately man, difficult of approach, and was absorbed, besides, by some overmastering care. But this fellow was one in a thousand and somehow, during the trip, he managed to do him some little service, which drew the attention of the great man to himself. This done, he so improved his opportunity that the two were soon on the best of terms, and he learned that the Englishman was without a valet and, being unaccustomed to move about without one, felt the awkwardness of his position very much.

This gave Sweetwater his cue, and when he found that the services of such a man were wanted only during the present trip and for the handling of affairs quite apart from personal attendance upon the gentleman himself, he showed such an honest desire to fill the place, and made out to give such a good account of himself, that he found himself engaged for the work before reaching C—

This was a great stroke of luck, he thought, but he little knew how big a stroke or into what a series of adventures it was going to lead him.

Once on the platform of the small station at which Mr. Grey had hidden him to stop, he noticed two things: the utter helplessness of the man in all practical matters, and his extreme anxiety to see all that was going on about him without being himself seen.

There was method in this curiosity, too much method, if Mr. Grey had not interested him in the least. They could pass and repass without arousing his attention, but the moment a man stepped his way, he shrank from him only to betray the greatest curiosity concerning him the moment he felt it safe to turn and observe him. All of which convinced Sweetwater that the Englishman's errand was in connection with a man whom he equally dreaded and desired to meet.

Of this he was made absolutely certain a little later. As they were leaving the depot with the rest of the arrivals, Mr. Grey said:

"I want you to get me a room at a very quiet hotel. This done, you are to hunt up the man whose name you will find written in this paper, and when you have found him, make up your mind to follow him. It will be possible for me to get a good look at him without his getting any sort of a look at me. Do this and you will earn a week's salary in one day."

Sweetwater, with his head in the air and his heart on fire—for matters were looking very promising indeed—took the paper and put it in his pocket; then he began to hunt for a hotel. Not till he had found what he wished, and installed the Englishman in his room, did he venture to open the precious memorandum and read the name he had been speculating over for an hour.

It was not the one he had anticipated, but it came near to it. It was that of James Wellgood.

Satisfied now that he had a ticklish matter to handle, he prepared for it, with his usual enthusiasm and circumspection.

Stammering out into the street, he stroled first toward the postoffice. The train on which he had just come had been a mail-train, and he calculated that he would find half the town there.

His calculation was a correct one. The store was crowded with people. Taking his place in the line drawn up before the postoffice window, he awaited his turn, and when it came shouted the name which was his one talisman—James Wellgood.

The man behind the boxes was used to the name and reached out a hand to the name usually well stacked, but stopped halfway there and gave Sweetwater a sharp look.

"Who are you?" he asked.
[To be Continued.]

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At the Chateau Frontenac—at Place Viger Hotel, Montreal—at Banff-Royal Alexandra, Winnipeg—on their Pullmans and ocean liners—guests and passengers are provided with "Royal Crown" Witch-Hazel.

It's a medicated soap, and a toilet soap. Two soaps in one for the price of one. 10c a cake. 12 cakes for 25c.

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