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The Woman in the Alcove

BY ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

Author of "The Millionaire Baby," "The Filigree Ball," "The Leavenworth Case," Etc., Etc.
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"I'm sorry, Madam, if you were expected 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 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 for ever 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 hall?"

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."

"It is because of something you knew about him before tonight?"

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. Someone 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 started 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 anyone 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 trepidation 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 eyes? 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 them. 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

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WHEN ICE PACK FAILED PEARY

Theory of Palaeocrystic Sea Was Exploded.

FLOES OF FAR NORTH UNSTABLE

The Mild Arctic Season Contributed to Explorer's Failure to Reach the Pole.

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 whitening 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 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.

CHAPTER III.

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 his 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 consciousness 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 piled 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.

To be Continued.

New York, Nov. 5.—Peary's long sledge journey over the American Arctic Ocean will give to the palaeocrystic sea its final quietus. The British expedition under Capt. Nares was the first to enter, in 1876, the ocean north of Grant Land, that has been the scene of Peary's latest sledge journey. On the edge of that sea Nares saw what he called floes; also floes of ice of a very different character from those observed in the European Arctic.

These floes, or ice masses in the sea, varied from 20 to 50 feet in thickness and the areas of some of their surfaces was as much as thirty square miles. They were as big as many islands rising above the surface of the sea. The world's curiosity was aroused, for such immense masses of sea ice had not been heard of before.

Then there were the floes rising to heights of 50 to 800 feet and resembling the flat-topped icebergs of the Antarctic regions. There was a great deal of discussion about the form of ice. Several theories as to their origin were discussed and it was finally decided that they must be due to the annual snowfalls in this region, where there is very little melting, and the world's curiosity was aroused, for such immense masses of sea ice had not been heard of before.

These forms were so very different from the polar pack observed to the north of Spitzbergen that a distinctive term came to be applied to the region where they were found. So this part of the Arctic Ocean was named by Nares the Palaeocrystic Sea, or sea of ancient ice. It was argued, for a number of reasons, that this sea, covered with enormously thick ice, was of great extent, and also that it was a shallow sea, and it was believed that most of the floes grounded on the bottom. Many of the floes were supposed to be centuries old. Surely, if sledges could be drawn along the surface of these floes, though it was very rough hauling, there would be a pretty stable sort of foundation to travel over, for it would be likely to float away and leave some explorer in the lurch who should happen to get between the palaeocrystic ice and the north pole.

Peary, by actual experience, has put an end to this theory of enormous thick ice covering a large part of the Arctic Sea to the north of America. He has been there, hundreds of miles from the land, and he found the ordinary floe ice thick, to be sure, in comparison with any ice we have seen, but not of the very ancient variety to which Nares introduced us.

The ice the Peary met was not grounded on the bottom of the sea, for anchored in this way it could not have drifted off to the southeast on the persuasion of a high wind, giving Peary and his belongings involuntary transportation to Greenland, which was just where he did not care to go.

In fact Peary has proved that the ice of the sea to the north of Grant Land is really no more stable than it is to the north of Asia and Europe, where the Fram drifted for many hundreds of miles to the northwest and where Capt. Cagni, of the Abruzzi expedition drifted some 60 miles to the west when he was trying to make a straight road back to camp after reaching his highest north.

The failure of the ice in the American Arctic Ocean to afford a more or less stable highway for a sledge expedition, to the north pole, will probably destroy the last illusions as to the advantages offered by polar ice anywhere for sledge travel poleward. The American Arctic sea ice had not been fully tested in this respect until Peary went on this last journey. He achieved the highest north in spite of the fact that in the long run the ice as a sledge route failed him more utterly than it has failed any previous explorer who attempted to use it as a route to the pole; in other words, the days came when he was put in the perilous plight, though he was far from land, of being unable to sledge another mile, for the ice was broken up into big and little islands and was floating off to the southeast.

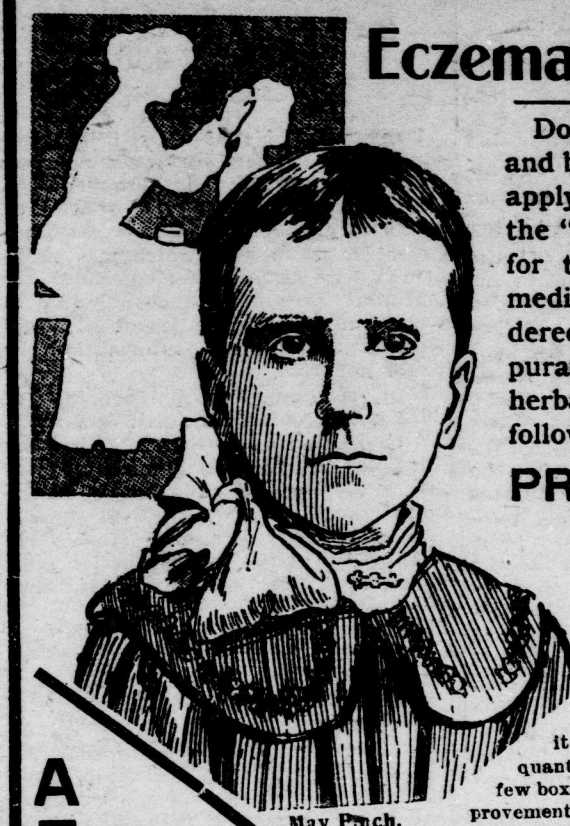
We heard early last summer that the winter had been unusually mild in all parts of the Arctic from which reports had been received. Peary's report seems to show that these conditions prevailed very far north in the American Arctic. This fact may have had a large influence in disintegrating the Arctic ice, so that it was more easily broken up by great windstorms.

There are one or two curious resemblances between Peary's recent experience and that of Cagni in 1900, when that fine Italian explorer and right-hand man of the Duke of Abruzzi made his record for the highest north, which stood until Peary surpassed it.

Cagni's work was done far to the north of the Franz Josef Land archipelago. The ice did not break up under his sledges, but now and then he found that he was afloat on a big or little floe, and he had to wait until he was involuntarily ferried across to some neck of ice that he could cross to a more extensive floe. Then he picked his way along, sometimes in great danger, for in his eagerness to get ahead he sometimes ran great risks by crossing from one ice field to another on very thin, new ice. So he was greatly delayed, as Peary was this summer, by the opening of channels and all the phenomena of the breaking up of large areas of sea ice.

The lives of Peary's party were saved by the fact that they had eight dogs, which they turned into food. As Cagni was returning south in 1900 he knew that

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he was being so delayed by open water that he could not possibly get back to camp before the exhaustion of his food supplies. He picked out eight of his dogs which were to be killed by one at a time, needed to eke out the rations of the party. They began to eat the dogs, but the conditions of travel became more favorable toward the last, and not all of them became food for explorers. But he had set apart for the culinary department just the number of dogs that were eaten by Peary's men.

The Italians liked the dogs, too. They said they were excellent eating, and it will not be surprising if we hear a somewhat similar report from the American explorer.

There are too many people who are satisfied with merely looking the part. Doctors enjoy ill-health remarkably.

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The "golden rose," which the Pope presented Princess Ena on the occasion of her marriage, is the highest honor that can be conferred on Catholic princes. It is a mimic plant of pure gold in a golden pot whereon are emblazoned the papal arms. It has leaves, buds and flowers, the leaves being set with small jewels in imitation of dewdrops. In the central flower is a tiny receptacle in which is contained a small palm leaf blessed by the Pope.

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