

The Woman In the Alcove

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Author of "The Millionaire Baby," "The Filigree Ball," "The House in the Mist," "The Amethyst Box," Etc.

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CONTINUED

"Take that back," said he. "I have some business to transact with this gentleman before I eat. I'll ring when I want you."

Then they entered where I was. As the door closed I caught sight of the inspector's face turned earnestly toward me. In his eyes I read my duty and girded up my heart, as it were, to meet what? In that moment it was impossible to tell.

The next enlightened me. With a total ignorance of my presence, due probably to his great excitement, Mr. Grey turned on his companion the moment he had closed the door and, seizing him by the collar, cried: "Fairbrother, you villain, why have you called on your wife like this? Are you murdering as well as thief?"

Fairbrother! This man? Then who was he who was being nursed back to life on the mountains beyond Santa Fe? Sear? Anything seemed possible in that moment.

Meanwhile, dropping his hand from the other's throat as suddenly as he had seized it, Mr. Grey caught up the stiletto from the table where he had flung it, crying, "Do you recognize this?"

Ah, then I saw guilt!

In a silence worse than any cry this so-called husband of the murdered woman, the man on whom no suspicion had fallen, the man whom all had thought a thousand miles away at the time of the deed, stared at the weapon thrust under his eyes, while over his face passed all those expressions of fear, abhorrence and detected guilt which, fool that I was, I had expected to see reflected in response to the same test in Mr. Grey's equable countenance.

The surprise and wonder of it held me chained to the spot. I was in a state of stupefaction, so that I scarcely noted the broken fragments at my feet. But the intruder noticed them. Wrenching his gaze from the stiletto which Mr. Grey continued to hold out, he pointed to the broken cup and saucer, muttering:

"That is what startled me into this betrayal—the noise of breaking china. I cannot bear it since—"

He stopped, bit his lip and looked around him with an air of sudden bravado.

"Since you dropped the cups at your wife's feet in Mr. Ramsdell's alcove," finished Mr. Grey with admirable self-possession.

"I see that explanations from myself are not in order," was the grim retort, launched with the bitterest sarcasm. Then as the full weight of his position crashed in on him his face assumed an aspect startling to my unaccustomed eyes, and thrusting his hand into his pocket he drew forth a small box which he placed in Mr. Grey's hands.

"The Great Mogul," he declared simply.

It was the first time I had heard this diamond so named.

Without a word that gentleman opened the box, took one look at the contents, assumed a satisfied air and carefully deposited the recovered gem in his own pocket. As his eyes returned to the man before him all the passion of the latter burst forth.

"It was not for that I killed her!" cried he. "It was because she defied me and flouted her disobedience in my very face. I would do it again, yet!"

The Knock-out Blow.

The blow which knocked out Corbett was a revelation to the prize fighters. From the earliest days of the ring the knock-out blow was aimed for the jaw, the temple or the jugular vein. Stomach punches were thrown in to worry and weary the fighter, but if a scientific man had told one of the old fighters that the most vulnerable spot was the region of the stomach, he'd have laughed at him for an ignoramus. Dr. Pierce is bringing home to the public a plain fact; that the stomach is the most vulnerable organ out of the prize ring as well as in it. We protect our heads, throats, feet and lungs, but the stomach is utterly indifferent to, until discovered, the solar plexus and knocks us out. Make your stomach sound and strong by the use of Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery, and you protect yourself in your most vulnerable spot. "Golden Medical Discovery" cures "weak stomach," indigestion, or dyspepsia, torpid liver, bad, thin and impure blood and other diseases of the organs of digestion and nutrition.

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Here his voice broke and it was in a different tone and with a total change of manner he added: "You stand appalled at my depravity. You have not lived my life." Then quickly and with a touch of sullenness: "You suspected me because of the stiletto. It was a mistake, using that stiletto. Otherwise the plan was good. I doubt if you know how I found my way into the alcove, possibly under your very eyes; certainly under the eyes of many who knew me."

"I do not. It is enough that you entered it; that you confess your guilt."

Here Mr. Grey stretched his hand toward the electric button.

"No, it is not enough." The tone was fierce, authoritative. "Do not ring the bell—not yet. I have a fancy to tell you how I managed that little affair."

Glancing about he caught up from a nearby table a small brass tray.

Emptying it of its contents, he turned on us with drawn down features and an obsequious air so opposed to his natural manner that it was as if another man stood before us.

"Pardon my black tie," he muttered, holding out the tray toward Mr. Grey.

Wellgood!

The room turned with me. It was he, then, the great financier, the multimillionaire, the husband of the magnificent Grizel, who had entered Mr. Ramsdell's house as a waiter!

Mr. Grey did not show surprise, but he made a gesture, when instantly the tray was thrown aside, and the man resumed his ordinary aspect.

"I see you understand me," he cried. "I, who have played host at many a ball, passed myself off that night as one of the waiters. I came and went, and no one noticed me. It is such a natural sight to see a waiter passing like that going in and out of the alcove did not attract the least attention. I never look at waiters when I attend balls. I never look higher than their trays. No one looked at me higher than my tray. I held the stiletto under the tray, and when I struck her she threw up her hands, and they hit the tray, and the cups fell. I have never been able to bear the sound of breaking china since. I loved her!"

A gasp, and he recovered himself.

"That is neither here nor there," he muttered. "You summoned me under threat to present myself at your door today. I have done so. I meant to restore your diamond simply. It has become worthless to me. But fate exacted more. Surprise forced my secret from me. That young lady with her damnable awkwardness has put my head in a noose, but do not think to hold it there. I did not risk this interview without precautions. I assure you, and when I leave this hotel it will be as a free man."

With one of his rapid changes, wonderful and inexplicable to me at the moment, he turned toward me, with a bow, saying courteously enough:

"We will excuse the young lady."

Next moment the barrel of a pistol gleamed in his hand.

The moment was critical. Mr. Grey stood directly in the line of fire, and the audacious man who thus held him at his mercy was scarcely a foot from the door leading into the hall. Marking the desperation of his look and the steadiness of his finger on the trigger, I expected to see Mr. Grey recoil and the man escape. But Mr. Grey held his own, though he made no move and did not venture to speak. Nerved by his courage, I summoned up all my own. This man must not escape nor must Mr. Grey suffer. The pistol directed against him must be diverted to myself. Such amends were due one whose good name I had so deeply if secretly insulted. I had but to scream, to call out for the inspector, but a remembrance of the necessity we were now under of preserving our secret, of keeping from Mr. Grey the fact that he had been under surveillance, was even at that moment surrounded by the police, deterred me, and I threw myself toward the bell instead, crying out that I would raise the house if he moved, and laid my finger on the button.

The pistol swerved my way. The face above it smiled. I watched that

smile. Before it broadened to its full extent, I pressed the button.

Fairbrother stared, dropped his pistol and burst forth with these two words:

"Brave girl!"

The tone I can never convey.

Then he made for the door.

As he laid his hand on the knob, he called back:

"I have been in worse straits than this!"

But he never had. When he opened the door, he found himself face to face with the inspector.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LATER, it was all explained. Mr. Grey, looking like another man, came into the room where I was endeavoring to soothe his startled daughter and devour in secret my own joy. Taking the sweet girl in his arms he said, with a calm ignoring of my presence, at which I secretly smiled:

"This is the happiest moment of my existence, Helen. I feel as if I had recovered you from the brink of the grave."

"Me? Why, I have never been so ill as that."

"I know, but I have felt as if you were doomed ever since I heard or thought I heard in this city, and under no ordinary circumstances, the peculiar cry which haunts our house on the eve of any great misfortune. I shall not apologize for my fears. You know that I have good cause for them, but today, only today, I have heard from the lips of the most arrant knave I have ever known that this cry sprang from himself with intent to deceive me. He knew my weakness, knew the cry. He was in Darlington Manor when Cecilia died, and wishing to starve me into dropping something which I held, made use of his ventriloquial powers (he had been a mountebank once, poor wretch!) and with such effect that I have not been a happy man since in spite of your daily improvement and continued promise of recovery. But I am happy now, relieved and joyful, and this miserable being—would you like to hear his story? Are you strong enough for anything so tragic? He is a thief and a murderer, but he has feelings, and his life has been a curious one and strangely interwoven with ours. Do you care to hear about it? He is the man who stole our diamond."

My patient uttered a little cry.

"Oh, tell me," she entreated, excited, but not unhealthfully, while I was in an anguish of curiosity I could with difficulty conceal.

Mr. Grey turned with courtesy to me and asked if a few family details would bore me. I smiled and assured him to the contrary, at which he settled himself in the chair he liked best and began a tale which I will permit myself to present to you complete and from other points of view than his own.

Some five years before one of the great diamonds of the world was offered for sale in an eastern market. Mr. Grey, who stopped at no expense in the gratification of his taste in this direction, immediately sent his agent to Egypt to examine the stone. If the agent discovered it to be all that was claimed for it and within the reach of a wealthy commoner's purse, he was to buy it. Upon inspection it was found to be all that was claimed, with one exception. In the center of one of the facets was a flaw, but as this was considered to mark the diamond and rather add to than detract from its value as a traditional stone with many historical associations it was finally purchased by Mr. Grey and placed among his treasures in his manor house in Kent. Never a suspicious man, he took delight in exhibiting this acquisition to such of his friends and acquaintances as were likely to feel any interest in it, and it was not an uncommon thing for him to allow it to pass from hand to hand while he pottered over his other treasures and displayed this and that to such as had no eyes for the diamond.

It was after one such occasion that he found on taking the stone in his hand to replace it in the safe he had had built for it in one of his cabinets that it did not strike his eye with its usual force and brilliancy, and on examining it closely he discovered the absence of the telltale flaw. Struck with dismay, he submitted it to a still more rigid inspection, when he found that what he held was not even a diamond, but a worthless bit of glass, which had been substituted by some cunning knave for his invaluable gem.

For the moment his humiliation almost equalled his sense of loss. He had been so often warned of the danger he ran in letting so priceless an object pass around under all eyes but his own. His wife and friends had prophesied some such loss as this not once, but many times, and he had always laughed at their fears, saying that he knew his friends and there was not a scamp among them. But now he saw it proved that even the intuition of a man well versed in human nature is not always infallible, and, ashamed of his past laxness and more ashamed yet of the doubts which this experience called up in regard to all his friends, he shut up the false stone with his usual care and buried his loss in his own bosom till he could sift his impressions and recall with some degree of probability the circumstances under which this exchange could have been made.

It had not been made that evening. Of this he was positive. The only persons present on this occasion were friends of such standing and repute that suspicion in their regard was simply monstrous. When and to whom, then, had he shown the diamond last? Alas, it had been a long month since he had shown the jewel. Cecilia, his youngest daughter, had died in the interim; therefore his mind had not been on jewels. A month!—time for his pre-

cious diamond to have been carried back to the east! Time for it to have been recast! Surely it was lost to him forever, unless he could immediately locate the person who had robbed him of it.

But this promised difficulties. He could not remember just what persons he had entertained on that especial day in his little hall of cabinets, and, when he did succeed in getting a list of them from his butler, he was by no means sure that it included the full number of his guests. His own memory was execrable, and, in short, he had but few facts to offer to the discreet agent sent up from Scotland Yard one morning to hear his complaint and act secretly in his interests. He could give him carte blanche to carry on his inquiries in the diamond market, but little else. And while this seemed to satisfy the agent, it did not lead to any gratifying result to himself, and he had thoroughly made up his mind to swallow his loss and say nothing about it, when one day a young cousin of his living in great style in an adjoining county informed him that in some mysterious way he had lost from his collection of arms a unique and highly prized stiletto of Italian workmanship.

Startled by this coincidence, Mr. Grey ventured upon a question or two which led to his cousin's confiding to him the fact that this article had disappeared after a large supper given by him to a number of friends and gentlemen from London. This piece of knowledge, still further coinciding with his own experience, caused Mr. Grey to ask for a list of his guests in the hope of finding among them one who had been in his own house.

His cousin, quite unconscious of the motives underlying this request, hastened to write out this list, and together they pored over the names, crossing out such as were absolutely above suspicion. When they had reached the end of the list, but two names remained uncrossed. One was that of a rattled youth who had come in the wake of a highly reputed connection of theirs and the other that of an American tourist who gave all the evidences of great wealth and had presented letters to leading men in London which had insured him attentions not usually accorded to foreigners. This man's name was Fairbrother, and the moment Mr. Grey heard it he recalled the fact that an American with a peculiar name, but with a reputation for wealth, had been among his guests on the suspected evening.

Hiding the effect produced upon him by this discovery, he placed his finger on this name and begged his cousin to look up its owner's antecedents and present reputation in America; but, not content with this, he sent his own agent over to New York, whither, as he soon learned, this gentleman had returned. The result was an apparent vindication of the suspected American.

He was found to be a well known citizen of the great metropolis, moving in the highest circles and with a reputation for wealth won by an extraordinary business instinct.

To be sure, he had not always enjoyed these distinctions. Like many another self-made man, he had risen from a menial position in a western mining camp to be the owner of a mine himself and so up through the various gradations of a successful life to a position among the foremost business men of New York. In all these changes he had maintained a name for honest if not generous dealing. He lived in great style, had married and was known to have but one extravagant fancy. This was for the unique and curious in art, a taste which, if reported spoke true, cost him many thousands each year.

This last was the only clause in the report which pointed in any way toward this man being the possible abstractor of the Great Mogul, as Mr. Grey's famous diamond was called, and the latter was too just a man and too much of a fancier in this line himself to let a fact of this kind weigh against the favorable nature of the rest. So he recalled his agent, double locked his cabinets and continued to confine his display of valuables to articles which did not suggest jewels. Thus three years passed, when one day he heard mention made of a wonderful diamond which had been seen in New York.

From its description he gathered that it must be the one surreptitiously abstracted from his cabinet, and when, after some careful inquiries, he learned that the name of its possessor was Fairbrother, he awoke to his old suspicions and determined to probe this matter to the bottom—but secretly. He still had too much consideration to attack a man in high position without full proof.

Knowing of no one he could trust with so delicate an inquiry as this had now become, he decided to undertake it himself, and for this purpose embraced the first opportunity to cross the water. He took his daughter with him because he had resolved never to let his one remaining child out of his sight. But she knew nothing of his plans or reason for travel. No one did, indeed, only his lawyer and the police were aware of the loss of his diamond.

His first stop on landing was to learn that Mr. Fairbrother, of whose marriage he had heard, had quarreled with his wife and that, in the separation which had occurred, the diamond had fallen to her share and was consequently in her possession at the present moment.

This changed matters, and Mr. Grey's only thought now was to surprise her with the diamond on her person and by one glance assure himself that it was indeed the Great Mogul. Since Mrs. Fairbrother was reported to be a beautiful woman and a great society belle, he saw no reason why he should not meet her publicly, and that very soon. He therefore accepted invitations and attended theaters and

balls, though his daughter had suffered from her voyage and was not able to accompany him. But alas! He soon learned that Mrs. Fairbrother was never seen with her diamond and, one evening after an introduction at the opera, that she never talked about it. So there he was, balked on the very threshold of his enterprise, and, recognizing the fact, was preparing to take his now seriously ailing daughter south, when he received an invitation to a ball of such a select character that he decided to remain for it, in the hope that Mrs. Fairbrother would be tempted to put on all her splendor for so magnificent a function and thus gratify him with a sight of his own diamond. During the days that intervened he saw her several times and very soon decided that, in spite of her reticence in regard to this gem, she was not sufficiently in her husband's confidence to know the secret of its real ownership. This encouraged him to attempt piquing her into wearing the diamond on this occasion. He talked of precious stones and finally of his own, declaring that he had a connoisseur's eye for a fine diamond, but had seen none as yet in America to compete with a specimen or two he had in his own cabinets. Her eyes flashed at this, and though she said nothing, he felt sure that her presence at Mr. Ramsdell's house would be enlivened by her great jewel.

So much for Mr. Grey's attitude in this matter up to the night of the ball. It is interesting enough, but that of Abner Fairbrother is more interesting still and much more serious.

His was, indeed, the hand which had abstracted the diamond from Mr. Grey's collection. Under ordinary conditions he was an honest man. He prized his good name and would not willingly risk it, but he had little real conscience, and once his passions were aroused nothing short of the object desired would content him. At once forceful and subtle, he had at his command infinite resources which his wandering and eventful life had heightened almost to the point of genius. He saw this stone and at once felt an inordinate desire to possess it. He had coveted other men's treasures before, but not as he coveted this. What had been longed in other cases was mania in this. There was a woman in America whom he loved. She was beautiful, and she was splendid looking. To see her with this glory on her breast would be worth almost any risk which his imagination could picture at the moment. Before the diamond had left his hand he had made up his mind to have it for his own. He knew that it could not be bought, so he set about obtaining it by an act he did not hesitate to acknowledge to himself as criminal. But he did not act without precaution. Having a keen eye and a proper sense of size and color, he carried away from his first view of it a true image of the stone, and when he was next admitted to Mr. Grey's cabinet room he had provided the means for deceiving the owner, whose character he had sounded.

He might have failed in his daring attempt if he had not been favored by a circumstance no one could have foreseen. A daughter of the house, Cecilia by name, lay critically ill at the time, and Mr. Grey's attention was more or less distracted. Still the probabilities are that he would have noticed something amiss with the stone when he came to restore it to its place if just as he took it in his hand there had not risen in the air outside a weird and wailing cry which at once seized upon the imagination of the dozen gentlemen present, and so nearly prostrated their host that he thrust the box he held unopened into the safe and fell upon his knees, a totally unnerved him, crying:

"The banshee! The banshee! My daughter will die!"

Another hand than his locked the safe and dropped the key into the distracted father's pocket.

Thus a superhuman daring conjoined with a special intervention of fate had made the enterprise a successful one, and Fairbrother, believing more than ever in his star, carried this invaluable jewel back with him to New York. The stiletto—well, the taking of that was a folly for which he had never ceased to blush. He had not stolen it. He would not steal so inconsiderable an object. He had merely put it in his pocket when he saw it forgotten, passed over, given to him, as it were. That the risk, contrary to that involved in the taking of the diamond, was far in excess of the gratification obtained he realized almost immediately; but, having made the break and acquired the cue, he spared himself all further thought of the consequences and presently resumed his old life in New York, none the worse, to all appearances, for these escapades from virtue and his usual course of fair and open dealing.

But he was soon the worse from jealousy of the wife which his new possession had possibly won for him. She had answered all his expectations as mistress of his home and the exponent of his wealth, and for a year—happy, indeed, he had been more than that. He had been triumphant, especially on that memorable evening when, after a cautious delay of months, he had dared to pin that unapproachable sparkle to her breast and present her thus belated to the smart set—her whom his talents, and especially his far-reaching business talents, had made his own.

Recalling the old days of Barker and sale across the pine counter in Colorado, he felt that his star was high and for a time was satisfied with his wife's magnificence and the prestige she gave his establishment. But pride is not all, even to a man of his daring ambition. Gradually he began to realize first, that she was indifferent to him; next, that she despised him and

lastly, that she hated him. She had dozens at her feet, any of whom was more agreeable to her than her own husband, and, though he could not put his finger on any definite fault, he soon wearied of a beauty that only glowed for others and made up his mind to part with her rather than let his heart be eaten out by unappeasable longing for what his own good sense told him would never be his.

Yet, being naturally generous, he was satisfied with a separation, and, finding it impossible to think of her as other than extravagantly fed, waited on and clothed, he allowed her a good share of his fortune with the one proviso, that she should not disgrace him. But the diamond she stole, or rather carried off in her naturally high handed manner with the rest of her jewels. He had never given it to her. She knew the value he set on it, but not how he came by it, and would have worn it quite freely if he had not very soon given her to understand that the pleasure of doing so ceased when she left his house. As she could not be seen with it without occasioning public remark, she was forced, though much against her will, to heed his wishes and enjoy its brilliancy in private. But once, when he was out of town, she dared to appear with this fortune on her breast and again while on a visit west, and her husband heard of it.

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