

The House of the Whispering Pines

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

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PROLOGUE

English detective stories have their waxing and their waning 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 Viduogs are told, but Anna Katharine Green's detective stories, based on incidents of American life, are perennial bloomers. They know no permanent rivals in American liking.

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CHAPTER I

THE HESITATING STEP.

THE moon rode high, but ominous clouds were rushing toward it—clouds heavy with snow. I watched these clouds as I drove recklessly, desperately over the winter roads. I had just missed the desire of my life, the one precious treasure which I coveted with my whole undisciplined heart, and, not being what you call a man of 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 course, till the rapid recurrence of several well known landmarks warned me that I had taken the longest route home 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 stack of chimneys coming suddenly into view against the broad disk of the still unclouded moon, I perceived a thin 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 felt responsible. I turned in at the lower gateway. For reasons which I need not now state there were no bells attached to my cutter, and consequently my approach was noiseless. I was careful that it should be so; also careful to stop short of the front door and leave my horse and sleigh in the black depths of the pine grove, pressing up to the walls on either side. I was sure 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 pines 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 eye, 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 hotly 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.

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 pegs, 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 match-box 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

passed between us and the wreck she had made of my life. But here, in a place so remote and desolate I had hesitated to enter it myself, what was I to think? How was I to reconcile so inconceivable a fact with what I knew of her in the past, with what I hoped for her in the future?

It was evident that some grisly fear, some staring horror, had met her in this strange retreat. Simple grief speaks with a different language from that which I read in her distorted features and tottering, slowly creeping form. What had happened above? She had escaped me to run upon what? My lips refused to ask, my limbs refused to move, and if I breathed at all I did so with such fierceness of restraint that her eyes never turned my way, not even when she had reached the lowest step and paused for a moment there, oscillating in pain or uncertainty. Her face was turned more fully toward me, and I had just begun to discern something in it besides its tragic beauty when she made a quick move and blew out the candle she held.

Then there came a crash, followed by the sound of flying feet. She had flung the candlestick out of her hand and was hurriedly crossing the hall. I thought she was coming my way and instinctively drew back against the wall. But she stopped far short

of me, and I heard her groping steps as she gave a sudden shove toward the front door. It opened, and she stood upon my face and reared the instant. Then all was quiet and dark again. She had not quickened 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 bewitchment of my faculties. Then I felt an lesser motions 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 Carmel 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 hell's 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 now hung from the rack. The wall was free 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 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 stood upon, unseeing. Not to see and yet to feel—did that make the horror? 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 thorn Cumberland 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 regarding 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 hung 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 wrong 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, protuberant stare those features told nothing, and, steeling myself to the situation, I made what observation I could of her condition and the surroundings.

Empiness 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 stood upon, unseeing. Not to see and yet to feel—did that make the horror? 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.

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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.



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 door 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 arctic in which they were clad were filled all around with snow. She had walked then as the other was walking now—she who defeated 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 hope was getting uppermost. If I had dreamed the marks—

But no! There they were, unmistakable and damning, just where the breath struggles lay. I put my own thumbs on these two dark spots to see if, when—What was it—a lightning-stroke or a call of fate which must answer while some reasoner I felt my head pulled around by some unseen force from behind and met 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 gale of blinding snow was sweeping past, making all things indistinguishable, but the absence of balcony outside was reassuring, and I stepped hastily back, asking myself for the first time what I should do and where 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, 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 leave the place—I would leave this gnawing pain 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 protuberance now) and, recklessly bent on flight, was halfway across the floor when any 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 ran thundering through the house, calling up innumerable echoes from its dead and hidden corners.

(To be continued.)

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