

The House of Whispers

By WILLIAM JOHNSTON

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(Continued from 1st page, this section)

imprudent in your crime," she ejaculated. "It's absurd for you to try to question me this way."

"Lady," interrupted the keeper, "you'll have to be going now. Time's up."

"Promise me," she begged hastily in an undertone, as she departed, "whatever you think about me, you'll keep my sister out of it."

"I'll promise nothing, unless you confess everything," I repeated, determined. If I could, to drag her secret from her, even though I, as well as she, was eager to shield Barbara's name.

Claire Bradford's attitude, I must confess, puzzled me greatly. Her denial that she had seen the revolver, or that she had been working in conjunction with Wick seemed to ring true, and I was also inclined to believe her statement that she knew nothing of her former husband's present whereabouts. While I was pondering over her statements, my cell door opened and J. Gorman was let in.

"Well, young fellow," he said, "this sleuthing business didn't turn out exactly the way we expected it to, did it?"

"Yes, I don't think I'm guilty, do you?"

I waited in agony for his answer.

If he failed me, there was no one absolutely no one, to whom I could turn.

"It looks like you were guilty from reading the morning papers," he answered with a grin. "But I don't believe all I read. They've made out a strong case against you, though."

"I didn't do it!" I cried passionately.

"If you didn't, who did?"

"It must have been Mr. Wick."

"There you go, jumping at conclusions. Why not Claire Bradford?"

"Why do you mention her? Do you suspect her?"

"If she didn't do it, why did she come down here to see you?"

"How did you know she was here?"

"I was watching you all the time you were talking to her."

"But how did you know who she was?"

"I saw the other one this morning. They look alike."

"But how did you know which sister it was?"

"You didn't seem to get along well enough in your talk for it to be Barbara," he answered with another grin.

It had not been my intention to reveal even to him Claire Bradford's second visit to my apartment, but I saw how foolish it would be of me to attempt to deceive or to withhold any information from such a shrewd observer.

Without reserve and with the utmost detail I proceeded to relate everything that had happened since I had seen him the afternoon before. I told of my discovery of the secret panel in my room and of the blind passageway into which it apparently led, of Barbara's having made the perilous journey over the window ledge to inspect my find, of the screams we had heard, followed by the shot, of how Barbara had fled back by the way she came, and I had run downstairs and with Wick had discovered the body. I told him every detail so far as I could remember it, winding up with my catching Claire Bradford leaving my apartment, just before my arrest and the finding of the revolver.

"You don't think the detectives themselves planted the gun on you?" he asked. "I've heard of them doing things like that."

He spoke with such an air of innocence that I had to smile. I doubt if there were many tricks of detectives that Gorman did not know all about.

"They had no opportunity whatever. Neither of them had been near the dresser before, and I was watching their every movement."

"Well, who did hide the revolver there, if they didn't?"

"I don't know."

"Couldn't Wick have done it?"

"I was with him every moment after we discovered the body."

"Maybe it was Claire Bradford?"

I shook my head.

"I thought at first it might have been she, but I'm convinced since talking with her that it was not. She's either entirely innocent or else the most wonderful actress in the world."

"I think we can leave her out of it," ventured Gorman.

"That leaves only Wick."

Gorman shook his head positively.

"No, Wick didn't do it. He's a bad one all right, and he has done time, but he's only a tool."

"Wick has done time!" I exclaimed. "How did you find that out? What have you learned about him?"

Gorman grinned at my eager ques-

"I don't know much about him yet, but I'm sure he's an ex-con. While you were in court this morning," he explained, "I went up to the Grand-deck to take a look at things for myself. Wick showed me through the Lutan apartment, thinking I was from the keeper's office. I spotted him at once. A crook that has done time is always sure to give himself away."

"How?" I asked.

"Well," said Gorman judicially, "men's businesses leave their marks on them. A clergyman don't have to be wearing a high vest for you to spot him, and nobody ever took a dancing teacher for a pugilist. A man that has looked at as many crooks as I have knows them by instinct, and then there's little ways you can tell. As I was going up to the apartment with Wick he just naturally fell into step with me, showing he had been used to marching with other prisoners. He talks, too, without moving his lips. That's a sure sign. They learn that in prison so they can talk without the guards knowing it."

"That's so," I cried. "It struck me that there was something funny about the way Wick talked, but I couldn't have told just what it was."

"Wick's a crook, all right, but I think he comes from somewhere upstate or maybe out West, but he hasn't intelligence enough to be anything more than a runner for the gang."

"Well, what's your theory?" I asked.

"If Wick didn't murder Miss Lutan, who did?"

"I don't know yet. Wick ain't big enough. Big jobs take big men to plan them. This whole thing is a big affair, carefully planned out. It takes more brains than Wick ever dreamed of having to plant anonymous notes and terrify people nearby out of their senses with mysterious whispers and then to steal the Bradford papers and the Gaston pearls and then when things get hot to have you already framed as the goat to blame things on."

"Then you think my discharge from the office was part of the plot?"

"Sure it was. You butted in on their backhand plans, and they wanted to get square with you, and a young fellow out of work and discharged in disgrace is always an easy mark for suspicion."

"And was it part of the plot to blame Miss Lutan's murder on me?"

"I don't think so. The Lutan murder was an accident. Even the biggest crooks seldom deliberately plan murder. They're all afraid of the chair. She came in and surprised some one of the gang in the apartment. He had to shoot her to make his getaway. It was quick thinking on somebody's part after the murder to plant that gun in your rooms. That sort of scheming takes brains, and Wick hasn't got them."

"Who was it, then?"

"We've got to find," said Gorman, speaking slowly and with emphasis,



"We've Got to Find the Crook That Is Back of All This—the Master Mind."

"the big crook that is back of all this—the master-mind."

"The master-mind," I echoed.

"Yes," he said, "there's a big crook ed brain somewhere that has been directing the whole plot, and planning the actions of Wick and of the telephone girl, and maybe of Claire Bradford, too."

"I wonder if it could be her ex-husband. She told me, though, a few moments ago, that she had not heard of him for years, and she seemed to me to be telling the truth."

"I don't think it was him," said Gorman. "He was only a chauffeur. If he's in it at all, he's only one of the gang. He's not the master-mind."

"I hope we can keep the Bradfords out of it altogether," I said. "You see, Gorman—"

"I understand," he interrupted. "I know how the land lies. You need not worry about that. If Claire Bradford had any part in the plot, you can bet she was forced into it and driven to do what she did. Have you seen her sister?"

"No, and I hope she'll make no effort to see me. She won't. You'll see her, won't you?"

"Leave it to me," said the detective. "I'll manage to reach her without even her own family knowing anything about it. I'll make her understand that if she tries to see you or says anything, she'll only be damaging your case. Don't worry about her."

"There's one thing, though," I said, "that I wish you could do."

"What's that?"

"Can you find some way of getting to the Gaston apartment and explor-

ing that secret passage and see where it leads?"

He turned savagely on me.

"Say, young fellow," he said, "if I didn't know that you were innocent, I'd swear that you were a dope fiend with this tale of a secret passage. You've been reading too many thrillers or going to the movies too much. They don't have secret passages in modern apartment houses. You better keep quiet about that. You can't get anybody to believe you, and you'll only hurt your case."

"But I know there's a passageway there—along the hall. I found the opening, a panel in my bedroom. There's a place there big enough for a man to walk in. I saw it."

He looked at me plyingly, and I could see that he did not believe a word I was saying.

"All right, there's a passage there, and we'll leave it there. A young fellow in love is apt to imagine all sorts of things."

I saw there was no use in my insisting further about the passageway. His mind was stubbornly made up that it could not exist. He was the only friend I had in all the great city, and I must leave it to him to work the thing out in his own way.

"What about a lawyer?" I asked.

"Didn't the court assign you one?"

"Yes, but he took it for granted that I was guilty, so I got rid of him."

"Well, there ain't much a lawyer could do yet. I'll dig up one when we need him. Bail is not possible in a murder case, so there is nothing for you to do but to sit tight and take it as easy as you can. By the way, have you heard anything from old Gaston since you were arrested?"

"Not a word," I answered. "I have not the least idea where he is or how to reach him."

"Humph, that's funny," said Gorman abstractedly. "Good-by, I'll see you again tomorrow."

He pounded on the cell door, and a guard released him, leaving me alone to ponder over my plight, and especially over his last question. What had he meant by it?

Where was old Rufus Gaston?

Once more suspicion of my aged relative shot through my brain. Was it possible that his was the master mind behind all this plotting? Gorman had insisted that the arch criminal behind Wick and the others must be some man of intellect. My great-uncle Rufus had brains. Out of a clear sky he had summoned me to live in the Granddeck and then had mysteriously disappeared. Certainly he had had opportunities for knowing Wick and the telephone girl. Barbara had recalled once having heard her father speak of him in disparaging terms. Had it been he who was plotting against the Bradfords and had brought me into the case as a scapegoat?

Was old Rufus Gaston the master mind? Where was he?

CHAPTER XI.

Fortunately for me, there had recently been a wave of public criticism of the courts for the long delays in bringing criminal cases to trial, and the district attorney was moving with all celerity to bring my case to a conclusion. An indictment against me for the murder of Daisy Lutan had been quickly found and the date had been already set for the trial—one week hence—so that the period of my incarceration and doubt as to my ultimate fate seemed likely to be very brief.

Utterly absurd as the situation was, accused of murdering a woman whom I never had seen and hardly had heard of until I saw her lying dead in her apartments, conscious as I was of my entire innocence in the matter, still, as in the solitude of my cell I reviewed the case, I found myself facing the ordeal of a trial for murder with considerable apprehension.

Circumstances certainly looked much against me. There was absolutely no way in which I could refute the testimony of the two detectives that they had found the revolver with one chamber discharged in the drawer of my dresser. I myself had seen them find it. While Gorman still held that there was a possibility that they themselves had put it there, I knew that neither of them had been near the dresser after I had admitted them to my rooms. The only person whom I had the slightest ground for suspecting was Claire Bradford, yet what motive could she have had?

Wick undoubtedly would testify that he had met me at the door of the Lutan apartment directly after he had heard the shot. He might say that I appeared to be greatly excited. This would be the exact truth. There was even the possibility that he might swear that he had found me coming out of Miss Lutan's apartment. Even if he did not make the statement direct, shrewd questioning on the part of the district attorney could easily make it appear that I had just left the Lutan apartment. How could we possibly controvert his testimony?

Then, in addition, there were the damaging statements that would be offered by Nellie Kelly. She would swear that the evening before I had taken her out to dinner and had been questioning her about the other tenants in the house. Even though we knew that she was a tool of Wick and was the wife of Lefty Moore, the burglar, unless Gorman was able to discover that she herself had a criminal record, it seemed utterly hopeless to attempt to confute her statements.

It would also militate against me that at the time of the murder I was out of a job and almost without funds. They were likely, too, to bring out the

fact that I had been discretely discharged from the only position I had held in New York. The only man who knew anything about the matter, Mr. Wood, the head of the firm, had been suddenly called to France in connection with an order for munitions, and was not expected to return for several months. The fact would weigh against me, too, that L. would

be unable to enter the testimony of any character witness. Birge and Koller, my classmates with whom I had roomed ever since I had come to New York, were "somewhere in France" with the American troops and could not possibly aid me.

(To be continued.)

Profane Expression. Do not think you are profane when you say that you "don't care a dam." The truth is that a dam was the smallest Hindu coin at a time when the English were invading India, and the expression that one "didn't give a dam" naturally sprang up to mean that a matter was of next to no importance.



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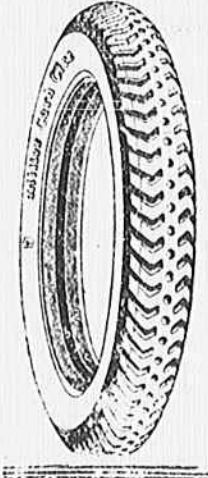
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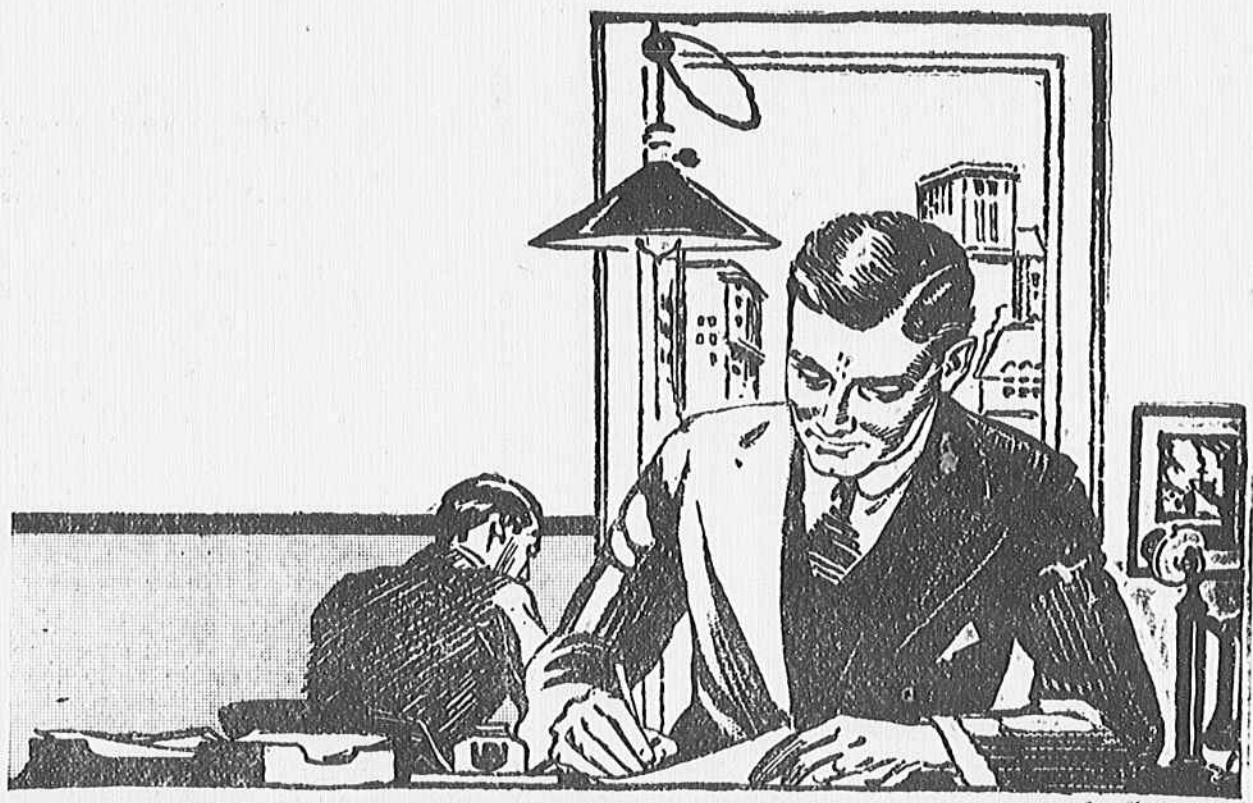
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