The House of Whispers

By WILLIAM JOHNSTON

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CHAPTER XII—Continued.

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"Nothing doing," he sneered. "Any crook daring enough to steal those pearls, once he had got his hands on them, never would return them. Pearls are too easily disposed of. You've got to dig up a better explanation than that."

"What did Mr. Gaston think? What did he say when he found them there?"

"He had nothing to say. He was so tickled at finding them again that he hustled with them right away to the safe deposit vaults and did not rest until he had them safely locked up. He took both jewel cases with him and made me go along with him to protect them."

"Didn't you look at all for the secret passageway I told you about?"

"Still dreaming about that, are you?" scoffed Gorman. "No, we didn't. On the way up to the Granddeck the old man spoke about it and I told him that in my opinion there was nothing to it. After he recovered the pearls he was too excited to think about anything else. It seemed to break him all up, and I took him back to his hotel and left him there. He said he had some writing to do, and that he would meet me at my office at noon today."

"How do you account for the return of the pearls?" I cried desperately. "What's your theory about them?"

"I haven't any," he replied. "It's up to you to explain it. Maybe by the time I come to see you tomorrow you'll have thought up a new yarn to spin."

"Please, please," I called after him as he turned away, "do look tomorrow and see if that secret passage is not where I said it was."

He walked away without answering. Back once more in my cell, I stretched myself despondently on my little iron cot, and closing my eyes, tried to concentrate my thoughts on an attempt to solve this new mystery, which I could plainly see had all but destroyed Gorman's faith in my honesty. I must solve it if I was to retain him in aiding me to get free, yet the whole thing seemed inexplicable. I could hardly blame him for doubting me. The great value of the pearls had been motive enough for their theft, but what possible motive could there have been for the thief returning them?

With a shock it came to me, too, that the restoration of the pearls practically upset the whole theory of my defense. If I could have established the fact of this theft, a jury might be persuaded to believe my tale of anonymous notes, mysterious whispers, and a secret passageway by which the thief had gained access to the apartment, but without the motive of theft, my story, unsupported by witnesses and uncorroborated by other evidence, surely would be incredible of belief.

I had just one hope left. Old Rufus must find that secret passageway and see whither it led. That, with our knowledge of the identity of the telephone girl and the possibility of proving Gorman's belief that Wick was an ex-convict, seemed likely to be my only salvation. Old Rufus must find that passageway. He must! He must!

For hours I lay there racking my brains over the unsolvable problems. My luncheon was brought in, but I waved it away untouched. Wearily I wondered whether the recovery of the pearls had destroyed my aged relative's faith in me, as it seemed to have destroyed Gorman's. I could hardly blame him if he doubted me after finding that my story of the disappearance of the pearls was apparently untrue. In my brief experience as a prisoner I had learned all too well the bitter fact that once a man is discredited, henceforth no one trusts him. If Rufus Gaston failed me at this juncture I did not see how I could possibly extricate myself unscathed from the web that unseeen hands had so skillfully and maliciously woven around me. The only ray of comfort that I could find anywhere in the whole situation was in my firm belief that though old Rufus and Gorman and the whole world doubted me, Barbara Bradford—my Barbara, I ventured to call her in my innermost heart—would continue to believe in me. She would be sure, no matter how much appearances went against me, that I was telling the truth. Barbara and I knew. Even if she had not known that I could not possibly have fired the shot that killed Miss Lutan, I was certain that she still would have trusted me.

Thinking about Barbara I recalled that it was the day of her sister's wedding. I had one of the prison attendants get me the evening papers to see what they had to say about it, for I was fearful lest some breath of scandal at the last moment involving the Bradfords might bring about a postponement. Eagerly I was hoping that nothing had happened to prevent the marriage taking place. With the fortunes of her sister assured and her mother's future safe, I realized that the course of my relations with Barbara would be likely to be much smoother sailing, provided of course that I was acquitted. In the few chats I had had with her, I had realized that wealth and luxury and social position meant nothing to Barbara's happiness. She was the sort of girl who for a man she loved gladly would brave poverty, hardship, everything—a sincere, true-hearted woman with a clear vision of the real values of existence.

My messenger returned with the newspapers, and as I picked them up, everything went black. "Millionaire Gaston Found Murdered," was the startling headline that flashed before me, right there in the column next to the account of the Bradford wedding.

The sinister effect of this terrible news dawned on me instantly. With my great-uncle Rufus dead, without the possibility of his corroborating any part of my story, my case was hopeless, desperate. Unquestionably it would mean that I would be found guilty of murder and sentenced to death in the electric chair. As soon as I could sufficiently compose myself I read every word there was in the newspapers about this new tragedy, smiling grimly at the thought that at least they could not blame this murder on me.

Mr. Gaston, it appeared, had come to the Granddeck about ten o'clock in the morning and had gone at once to his apartment. On his arrival he had been greeted by the telephone girl and had informed her that he was only in the city for a few days and was staying at a hotel. He had added that he would not be occupying the apartment for several weeks until his wife's return to the city. About half-past twelve there had come a telephone call for him. The girl had been unable to get any response from the apartment. Knowing that he had not gone out, and fearing that he might have had a sudden attack of illness, she had become alarmed and notified Mr. Wick, the superintendent.

The superintendent, the account continued, had summoned Mr. Henry Kent, the owner of the Granddeck apartments. Together they had gone to Mr. Gaston's rooms. Being unable to get any reply to repeated rings and knocks they had finally let themselves in with a pass key in possession of the owner of the building.

In his study in the rear of the apartment they were horrified to find old Rufus Gaston, fully clad, lying on the floor, face down, stone dead. A great wound on the back of his head showed that he had been killed, probably instantly, by a terrific blow from some sort of a blunt instrument. A search of the rooms failed to show any sort of a weapon.

The police theory was that the crime was undoubtedly the work of a burglar who had been trapped by the return of Mr. Gaston so unexpectedly to his apartment. How the murderer escaped after attacking Mr. Gaston was a puzzle to the detectives at work on the case. The superintendent of the building expressed the opinion that the murderer had gained access in the guise of a meter inspector. Attendants in the hall recalled that there had been such a man in the building that morning. As he wore the usual uniform and presented the customary credentials, he had been permitted to enter and leave the building unmolested.

There followed a long review of Rufus Gaston's business career and an estimate of some of his extensive holdings in stocks, bonds and real estate, from which it appeared that his fortune was likely to run to over ten million dollars. It was with some surprise that I learned that a score or more of years ago the old man apparently had been a powerful figure in the life of the metropolis, active both in its business and social life.

What interested me most was the attention paid to the remarkable coincidence that only a few weeks before a murder had taken place in the apartment just below, under practically the same circumstances. The police, the account stated, were inclined to believe that the murderer was one

"Millionaire Gaston Found Murdered," Was the Startling Headline That Flashed Before Me.

of the gang to which young Nelson, now in prison charged with the murder of Miss Lutan, undoubtedly belonged. Their theory was that a burglar gang succeeded in planting Nelson in the apartment as a caretaker, and that this enabled them to get their bearings in the building and provide themselves with false keys for ransacking the rooms at their leisure. The guilt of young Nelson, the police say, is established beyond question, and they are hopeful of being able to round up his associates.

There was also a brief interview with Wick, in which he was quoted as saying:

"I was suspicious of Nelson from the start and tried to keep an eye on him. He was very secretive about his comings and goings and was always prying about trying to learn something about the other tenants. How Mr. Gaston came to employ him as caretaker I never learned, but it would be no hard matter for a slick young crook like him to impose on so old a man as Mr. Gaston with a cock and bull story."

I sniffed indignantly as I read this. I knew that Wick was deliberately trying to still further discredit me. I recalled that he himself had told me that Mr. Gaston had mentioned our relationship. It was obvious that he was deliberately withholding this information with a sinister purpose.

That Wick knew well who had killed Rufus Gaston, just as he knew who had shot Daisy Lutan, I was morally certain. I was inclined to agree with Gorman that Wick himself was not the murderer. The fact that he was of a cowardly and cringing nature seemed to argue against associating him actively with crimes of violence. Yet the virulent way in which he was adding to the evidence against me showed plainly that he was industriously engaged in masking the real murderer.

Who could the murderer be? I was confident that the same person who had killed Miss Lutan had killed my great-uncle. I could only conjecture as to the motive. The police theory that it was burglary seemed as logical as any. The more I pondered over the matter the more firmly I became convinced that there was a numerous criminal band at the back of it all. No one man or two men could carry out all the devilry, even with the help of the telephone girl.

I recalled, too, how I had been skillfully shadowed, work that evidently required organization and employees. I was convinced that Wick and the telephone girl were only two—more than likely two minor members—of a powerful body of criminals. That it was this same sinister force that had caused my discharge from the office I was equally sure. This sort of thing took brains—far bigger brains than Wick gave any evidence of possessing.

A peculiar apathy came over me as I finished reading the account. Never before had I so fully understood how thoroughly an innocent man could be damned by circumstantial evidence. I knew—Barbara knew—that I was absolutely innocent. I doubted much if we could get anyone else to believe it.

The cunning web had been woven with such malicious thoroughness that escape seemed impossible. What was the use of my fighting further?

CHAPTER XIII.

Coming as it did as a dire climax to all my other troubles, the shock of old Rufus Gaston's murder sent me into an apathetic state from which it seemed impossible for me to arouse myself. Without hope and even without interest I dully awaited the approach of my trial for murder.

While there never had been an opportunity for any bond of affection to become established between my aged relative and myself—in fact, I had seen him only three or four times in my whole life, and then only for brief periods—still his unexpected and dreadful end had bereft me of practically every hope of being acquitted of the absurd charge against me. Wick, it was plain, intended to disclaim all knowledge of my relationship to Mr. Gaston, and now there was no one else to explain how I happened to be living in the building at the time of Miss Lutan's murder. Unfortunately I had destroyed both Mr. Gaston's letter to me and the note from my mother which had first told me of the old man's intention. My great-aunt, I learned from the newspapers, had been completely prostrated by the tragedy and had been unable to come to the funeral. The shock of the news of her husband's violent end had left her in a very critical condition. It seemed to have wholly deranged her aged brain, and the physicians summoned to the Maine camp where she was refused to permit her to be removed from there or to let anyone talk with her, declaring that the least excitement of any sort would be apt to have fatal results.

To be sure there was my mother, who could prove my relationship, but I felt there was little use of dragging her into it. On reading of her uncle's death she had hastened on from the West to attend his funeral and had been puzzled and alarmed by not finding me there. All the time I had been in prison I had been writing her my usual weekly letter, affecting a cheerfulness I was far from feeling and telling her nothing of what had happened. Her letters to me, addressed to the Granddeck, had been forwarded by the post office, so that until after she arrived in the city she knew nothing of my plight. It had been my hope that I would be able to conceal everything from her until after I had been triumphantly acquitted. If I were not she would know the worst soon enough.

When she first learned, or from what source, of my predicament I was unaware. I did not even know of her presence in the city until the day after my great-uncle's funeral, when—just twenty-four hours before my trial was to begin—a keeper brought me word that she was waiting downstairs to see me.

I steeled myself for the interview with her. Naturally I expected that she would be terribly horror stricken and shocked at my plight, but what her attitude toward me would be I could not conjecture. I fully expected nothing but reproaches from her. She had been so opposed to my coming to New York that I felt certain that she would insist that my conduct must be responsible for my being where I now was. For years, it seemed to me, the relations between my mother and myself had been nothing but continuous misunderstandings. To my great amazement and bewilderment not an unkind word nor the suggestion of a reproachful thought came from her lips.

"Oh, my boy, my boy," she had cried as she saw me, "I know you didn't do it. I know my boy is innocent! What can I do to help you?"

In that glorious, wonderful moment of reaction all resentment I had felt toward her forever vanished. I had one sacred, unforgettable glimpse of the eternal greatness of the Mother-heart, ever ready to forgive, ever quick to comprehend, ever prompt to aid. For one sweet hour we talked together, more understandingly than ever before in our lives. Freely and fully I told her everything, even to my wonderful but hopeless love for Barbara Bradford. She was willing, anxious, eager to aid me—but what was there that she could do?—what was there that anyone could do?

It was hopeless for a lone woman of limited means, unacquainted with the big city and unused to its ways, to attempt to battle against such powerful and desperate criminals as were concerned in the far-reaching plot to make me the scapegoat of their heinous misdeeds. I could only advise her that she see McGregor and Gorman and be guided by what they suggested.

When the morning of my trial actually arrived I entered the courtroom in a state of dull apathy. The night before I had not slept at all. I had spent

"Oh, My Boy, My Boy!" She Had Cried as She Saw Me, "I Know You Didn't Do It."

all the black hours reviewing my life, especially the last year, thinking with what high hopes and great expectations I had come to the metropolis and how miserably everything had turned out for me. Step by step I had reviewed the events that had brought me, discredited, all but friendless, all but penniless, into this dismal courtroom accused of a horrible, cowardly deed, seeking to see wherein I might have altered my recent actions or changed the course of my life to avoid having arrived at this shameful goal. Yet, strange to say, I found myself after mature reflection convinced that had I this last year to live over again not in one iota would I have done differently—no, not even if I could have foretold what the future had in store for me.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

TAKE HIGH OFFICE MARCH 4

That Day Officially Set for Inauguration of the President of the United States.

President Washington was inaugurated for his second term, beginning March 4, 1793, and all the other presidents, except four, who were inaugurated March 5, because the 4th fell on Sunday.

The four exceptions were Presidents Monroe, second term, 1821; Taylor, 1840; Hayes, 1877; and President Wilson's second term, 1917. President Hayes took the oath March 3, 1877, and was formally inaugurated on the following Monday. President Wilson took the oath for his second term on Sunday, March 4. The usual inauguration parade took place the next day.

The question as to whether, in the event of March 4 falling on Sunday at the beginning of a term, there being an interregnum of one full day in the office, was first brought by John Quincy Adams when he was secretary of state. He applied for a dictum of the Supreme court to guide the manner of inaugurating President Monroe for his second term. The opinion of Chief Justice Marshall does not prohibit the president from taking the oath and entering his duties immediately after midnight of March 3, even if March 4 falls on Sunday.

Still Make Use of Blowgun.

The blowgun is still popular for hunting birds among the Kosati Indians in Louisiana. This weapon consists of a tube, usually of cane, about six feet long, rubbed smooth on the inside with an implement made for the purpose and carefully straightened with the aid of fire. Slender, pointed darts about eight inches long are used as ammunition, each one wrapped neatly along a third of its length with thistledown or cotton to make it fit the inside of the tube. The hunter places a dart in the tube, which he raises to his lips and with which he takes careful aim at his game; then with a quick puff of breath he drives the little dart flying with a sufficient force to impale and kill a small bird or squirrel.

"Tempus Fugit."

The teacher gave Margaret some yarn and cardboard, and after showing her how to work a design, told her to finish it at home. When she came to school the next day with the half-finished work, the teacher asked her why she had not finished it; if she had run out of yarn. "Oh, no," answered Margaret; "I just run'd out of time."

For the Poor.

The Revenue Collector—You can't run that tent show and pocket the proceeds without paying the war tax. That's not a benevolence, as you claim.

The Owner Manager—My friend, if you were familiar with my circumstances and my show you'd consider the purchase of every ticket a real charity.

Danes Re-Export Surplus to U. S.

Ira Nelson Morris Tells of Inner Phase of Post-War Commerce.

ARE GREATLY OVERSTOCKED

Ship Goods Back to United States, Add Double Cost of Transportation and Make Handsome Profit.

New York.—Ira Nelson Morris, United States minister to Sweden, who has returned to the United States for a vacation, is authority for information concerning an odd phase of post-war commerce between this and European countries, and bearing on the high cost of necessities here. He pointed out that after the armistice Denmark had imported from America in such tremendous volume that the country became greatly overstocked.

"Until within the last three or four months," Mr. Morris said, "Denmark was shipping back to the United States the very goods that had been sent from here to Copenhagen and reselling them in America at a profit after having added twice the cost of transatlantic carriage over the original costs.

Lower Freights to Westward.

"One reason why it has been profitable to reship to the United States the surplus stores of goods and materials, such as cotton originally received from this country, is that ships arriving in Europe laden with American goods would have had to return with empty holds. The fact that Europe had not enough else to export to America to fill outgoing bottoms caused a reduction in the freight rates to the west. Danish merchants thus engaged reaped a harvest even with the rate of exchange against them.

"Copenhagen, the ambassador said, is ambitious to become the great port of entry for Europe, and to that end is seeking to handle permanently the tonnage that used to go through Bremen and Hamburg. A vast amount of that business is now done in the Danish port."

Scandinavian countries are keen to do business with the United States, said Mr. Morris, and he added that it was advantageous to them and to us too.

"These northern countries need coal and look to America since England placed a ban on coal shipments to Scandinavian countries," he said parenthetically.

Much Pulp Wood in Sweden.

"Sweden and England should be able to solve the problem of America's newsprint shortage, for there is an unlimited supply of pulp wood, and only the uncertainty as to the future of the paper market seems to stand in the way of building new mills which would take care of the world's needs," Mr. Morris suggested. Reverting to the British coal situation, he commented: "England has not enough coal for herself and the big liners sailing under the British flag are forced to take two or three days longer to make transatlantic trips because they can cross with less fuel while not running at high speed."

Avalanche of Gold Coin Ruining Switzerland.

Geneva.—Switzerland is being buried in a golden avalanche, according to President Sarasin of the Swiss bank. He says the gold stored in banks has no outlet in Europe, that many industries are at a standstill and the situation is becoming worse. The hotel industry is nearly ruined, M. Sarasin says, because adverse exchange is keeping away tourists. He adds the country lost more than six billion francs by the war.

U-Boat Warfare Was Last Card

Secret Records Just Made Public Show Germany's Bad Plight.

URGED BY PEOPLE AND ARMY

"Things Cannot Get Worse," Declared Von Hindenburg, "the War Must Be Shortened by Every Possible Means."

Berlin—Secret protocols on the submarine war now made public include an account of the conference held at Pless on January 8 and 9, 1917, between Field Marshal von Hindenburg, General Ludendorff and Admiral von Holtzendorff, and other naval officers.

Admiral von Holtzendorff advocated unrestricted U-boat war toward which, he asserted, the German emperor and Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg seemed to be lukewarm. He added that Von Bethmann wanted to make diplomatic preparations in order to keep the United States out of the war and that the foreign office believed that if the United States came in South America was bound to follow.

During the course of the conversation Von Holtzendorff urged that Von Hindenburg become chancellor, the latter repeatedly refusing, saying he could not talk in the reichstag.

War Must Be Shortened.

The field marshal finally declared for the U-boat campaign on the basis of war with the United States.

"Things cannot get worse," he said. "The war must be shortened by every possible means."

General Ludendorff agreed with this, and Von Holtzendorff continued:

"The people and army are crying out for unrestricted U-boat war."

Another document gives an account of the conversation between Field Marshal von Hindenburg, General Ludendorff, and Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg at Pless on January 9, 1917, at which Von Bethmann said: "U-boat war is the last card. It is a very grave decision. If the military authorities regard it as indispensable I am not in a position to deny it."

Armed Against All.

Field Marshal von Hindenburg replied:

"We are armed against all eventualities; against the United States, Denmark, Holland and Switzerland. We need the most ruthless and energetic action, and therefore unrestricted U-boat war from February 1. The war must end quickly. We could hold on, but our allies could not."

General Ludendorff then further explained how unrestricted U-boat warfare would benefit the army, which, he added, "must be spared another Somme battle."

Von Bethmann-Hollweg declared America's aid, if she comes in, "will consist of foodstuffs for England, financial assistance, flying machines and a volunteer army," adding, "We will fix them all right."

Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg, in agreeing to adopt the course advocated ventured: "And if Switzerland comes in, and the French came through there?"

"That would not be favorable from a military point of view," said Von Hindenburg.

Villa Again in the Saddle

Francisco Villa has notified the new rulers of Mexico that if they do not act in accordance with his wishes he will resume his guerrilla warfare. This is the latest photograph of "Pancho," made at his camp at Las Delicias.

GERMANY IS HIT HARD

Loses Many Millions Through Band of Forgers.

Importers Also Victims of False Trade Permits—Numerous Arrests Made.

Berlin.—Hundreds of millions of marks in revenue have been lost to the German government during the last few months through the wholesale forgery and sale of import permits by gangs of swindlers operating along the western border, says a report printed in Koelnische Zeitung. Among the victims of the forgers are South and Middle German municipalities, industrial concerns and importers of foodstuffs. Although these operations had been going on for some time it was only a few weeks ago that attention was drawn to the swindle and the police began to get on the trail of the crooks.

It appears that when the Red army was in control of the Ruhr district its officers stumbled upon some of these false permits and immediately confiscated whatever goods had been imported through their use. The regular German authorities then came upon more of the same sort and an investigation was begun. Under direction of the Prussian food commissioner the police, sometimes in airplanes, searched the whole border country and succeeded in landing several bands of forgers behind the bars.

The false permits were stamped with a clumsy seal resembling that of the national import commissioner, and carried the initials M. R., presumably meant for Meissinger, the former commissioner. The band operating from Duesseldorf sold permits to members of the popular German circle known as the "Schiebertum," i. e., those engaged in underground illicit trade, so it was a case of no honor among thieves. Many of the deals put through by the Duesseldorf forgers amounted to 100,000 marks or more. Other gangs made their headquarters in Mayence and Flensburg.

A lively trade in forged export permits has also been unearthed by the police of Berlin and the customs guards at Hamburg and other ports. Most of the false export papers were for the sale of tools and airplane motors to the Scandinavian countries. The principals in this lucrative "business" were largely responsible for their own undoing, as they led such a wild life in the all-night cafes of Berlin, often spending as much as 30,000 marks in an evening, as to attract the attention of the public, and an investigation and their arrest followed.

How to Make Women Work.

Ripley, O.—Women living in the Linn bridge neighborhood are anxious to get their mail. Many of the younger men are away and young women know that unless they work the roads the mail man can't get to them. And this is the reason why they are laying rocks so that the mail man can make his rounds.

Hid From Army Four Years; Four Years More in Jail.

From Paris comes a warning to slackers the world over. Jean Simon lived at Rouen, France, when the war broke out. He did not relish risking his life against the Germans, but in a country where conscription is rigidly enforced, one can shirk the draft only by hiding.

Simon hid himself in a barn so effectively that he was found only last year. Now, after being condemned by a court-martial, he will be hidden from the world for four years more, and all that time he will do hard labor.

Seeking Improved Company.

Petersburg, Ky.—Brick of the Boone county distillery is being used to build a church at Paris, Ky. The building is being razed and the brick shipped to Paris.

INCREASE IN GRAIN CROPS

International Agricultural Institute Estimates Jump in India and Argentina.

Ottawa, Ont.—Increases in the grain crops of India and Argentina during the coming season are estimated by the International Institute of Agriculture, according to advices received here by the department of agriculture.

The Indian wheat crop for 1920 is estimated at 364,900,000 bushels. This is an increase of 84,900,000 bushels over last year and is 10,000,000 in excess of the average for the five years ending in 1919.

The corn crop of Argentina is estimated at 258,692,000 bushels, compared with 224,000,000 bushels last year, and a five years' average of 196,000,000 bushels.

Easier to Break Than Bills.

Knoxville, Tenn.—Eggs, instead of coin, are used as change in the small towns of East Tennessee. One storekeeper from Powell station, Tenn., says all his customers use eggs to make purchases. So great is the supply that in two days he gathered a total of 16,000. Eggs are being hauled to the municipal market in wagons, just as though they were potatoes, only the wagon beds are well lined with straw and sawdust.

Ghost in Cell.

Chester, Pa.—Police officers of Ridley Park had their hands full early one morning trying to quiet the nerves of the three negro prisoners charged with burglary, Henry Brooks and his two pals from Richmond, Va., Walter Moore and Joseph Ford. The negroes claimed their slumber was disturbed by the appearance of a ghost in their cell. It set them howling at the top of their voices and so deafening was the noise that the police were compelled to go to their aid and pacify them.

The barber belongs to a shaving set.