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HAT AFFAIR AT PORTSTEAD MANOR

GLADYS EDSON LOCKE

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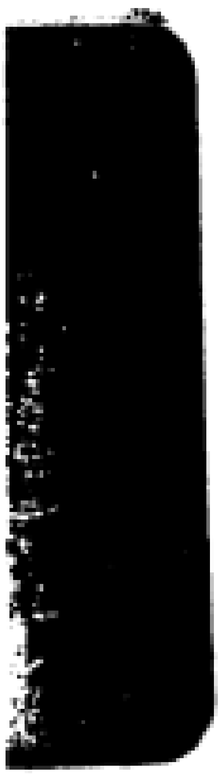

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THAT AFFAIR AT PORTSTEAD MANOR

BY

GLADYS EDSON LOCKE

Author of "Queen Elizabeth," etc.

BOSTON
SHERMAN, FRENCH & COMPANY
1914

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CHAPTER I

ALL ON ACCOUNT OF A NECKLACE

The chances are that had the Honourable Archibald Clavering suspected what adventures would befall him at Portstead Manor and what a sorry figure he would present in most of them, he would never have left his correct bachelor chambers in Mayfair to join Lady Ursula's house party, held in the ancestral home of the Sylvesters.

Portstead Manor was one of the finest old Elizabethan houses in England — a great, rambling, irregular structure of carven oak and painted plaster, with towers and turrets, gabled roofs, ivy-festooned chimneys, and quaintly-projecting upper stories.

Round about the mansion stretched lawns and terraces and wonderful gardens, encircled by a vast park of noble old trees, in the midst of which was a large lake, where the limpid-eyed deer came to drink. Beyond were acres of rich meadow lands, bordered by dense, dark woods. An abode of historic interest and placid charm was Portstead Manor, and the last place in the world where one would expect to meet mystery and tragedy.

It all began with Lady Pevensy insisting upon

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sending to town for a priceless family heirloom in the shape of a magnificent diamond necklace. With this she meant to dazzle the eyes of Portstead gentry at the first ball held there since the Manor was given to Lady Ursula by her brother at the time he came into his title. That was over ten years ago.

When Lady Ursula remonstrated with her guest for running such a risk so needlessly, Lady Pevensy replied that she should feel perfectly safe with the necklace since Mr. Clavering was of the party. Now the Honourable Archibald was a disciple of Sherlock Holmes in an amateur and theoretic way; that is, he understood that remarkable person's methods but had never had opportunity to put them into practise. This tribute to his latent detective powers flattered him, and, moreover, as he was plagued by a tender sentiment for the payer of it, he was at once set on his mettle and assured Lady Pevensy that she could wear the necklace with absolute security.

"So good of you, dear Mr. Clavering," she exclaimed, with a gushing enthusiasm that advancing years — she owned to forty-five — could not quench. "Otherwise I should almost feel obliged to have a detective down to watch it. It is really a great responsibility."

The necklace arrived on the afternoon of the day the ball was to be held. It was guarded on the journey by Lady Pevensy's family solicitor and her companion, Mary Grey.

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Lady Pevensy apologised to her hostess for introducing Mary Grey into the household, but declared that the girl was indispensable to her.

"Why, I did not know that you had a companion," remarked Lady Ursula in surprise.

"Oh, I haven't had her long," and Lady Pevensy changed the subject.

Now that the necklace had arrived Mr. Clavering felt to the full the responsibility of his position as guardian of its safety. He saw it borne upstairs in impressive state by Lady Pevensy, attended by Mary Grey, and he then decided, in the bare event of anything untoward happening, that it would be just as well for him to become somewhat acquainted with the habits of the household. In view of what did happen, he later took no little credit to himself for this foresight.

His fellow-guests he passed by with scarcely a thought. They were well known to him; and, let it be confessed, Mr. Clavering had the failing of most amateur detectives — he could not see beyond preconceived opinions. Trouble, then, if there should be any, must come from the servants.

The staff of servants was remarkably small for so large a house as Portstead, but then it was a distinct innovation for the Manor to be open to guests. Lady Ursula had always kept her town house for such gatherings, and her country residence merely, as Lady Pevensy put it, as a shelter for broken-down old servants. She had only opened it now at the urgency of her brother.

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The Earl of Portstead, before leaving for what was believed to be a secret diplomatic mission, although he called it a pleasure trip down the Nile, had wished to spend a few days with friends at Portstead Manor. His sister had yielded to his wishes. She generally did.

On this occasion she had increased the staff of servants by a butler, three footmen, and two under-housemaids. The others were real old family pensioners and, from what the head gardener told Mr. Clavering, resented the intrusion of guests and, more than all, of the new servants. Mr. Clavering also learned from the gardener that the new butler had departed that morning after two days' service and without giving notice. That accounted, then, for his absence at luncheon and for Lady Ursula's worried and distraught manner.

Mr. Clavering had taken particular notice of Thompson, the butler. There was a smouldering fire in the fellow's black eyes which belied the impassivity of the British servant, and he obviously chafed at receiving orders. "Evidently a man who has seen better days," was Mr. Clavering's inward comment. Moreover, there was a hint of something familiar in the thin, dark, frowning visage of Thompson. Where and under what circumstances had he met this man before?

After dinner, and before the Portstead gentry began to arrive for the ball, Mr. Clavering went down the circular stairs from the west wing into

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the great, vaulted library for a half-hour's contemplation. This sombrely splendid apartment, with its deep, leaded windows, its massive carven furniture, and its darkly-wainscoted walls lined with bookshelves reaching to the ceiling, had not been prepared for the coming guests and was illumined only by a few softly-burning tapers, whose shadowed light had a soothing effect upon Mr. Clavering's excited nerves.

Although he would not admit it even to himself, his responsibility was beginning to weigh upon him. In books, at least, diamond necklaces had such a deucedly unpleasant way of disappearing. He had several such cases in mind and was laboriously recalling the manner of their recovery when Mary Grey glided into the room and, passing quickly to the outer door, went down into the gardens.

Mr. Clavering looked after her with interest. She was a young woman of perhaps twenty-eight or nine, tall and slender, with brown hair simply coiled in her neck, large brown eyes, and a very pale face. She wore a simple gown of söft, clinging grey. Indeed, simplicity was the keynote of her appearance.

A studied simplicity Mr. Clavering decided, but he mentally pronounced her attractive and was about to stroll into the gardens — the moon was just silvering the trees of the park — when Lady Pevensy rushed down the circular stairs in a state of violent hysterics, so violent that her négligée was

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flying open and her switch, loosened at one end, bobbing wildly over her powdered nose.

"The necklace, Mr. Clavering!" she fairly screamed. "The necklace has been stolen!"

"Wha—at?" he gasped, leaping to his feet.

His great opportunity had suddenly come.

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CHAPTER II

MR. CLAVERING TAKES THE FIELD

Lady Ursula had followed Lady Pevensy down the stairs. Her face was quite as white as her guest's.

"But it cannot be stolen," she was persisting, with a hysterical pitch to her well-bred voice. "You must have mislaid it."

"One does not mislay diamond necklaces worth a king's ransom," retorted Lady Pevensy angrily. "I tell you it has been stolen. I locked it in my dressing-table drawer. Mary Grey and Parkins watched me do it. Then I put the key inside — well, I tied it around my neck. Parkins went to prepare my bath and Mary Grey went downstairs — into the gardens, I think. She had a headache, so she said. I was sitting with my eyes glued on the dressing-table drawer — I had a presentiment something was going to happen to that necklace — when there came a knock on the door. I opened it, but there was nobody there — just your note lying on the floor."

Lady Ursula stared at her in blank amazement. "My note! What on earth are you talking about?"

"Talking about! Have you lost your mem-

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ory?" snapped Lady Pevensy, with a vehemence worthy a Billingsgate fishwife. "You seem not only to have forgotten the important matter you had to tell me, but now you don't even remember your note asking me to come at once to your dressing-room."

Lady Ursula's amazement deepened. "But I wrote you no note," she protested.

Here Mr. Clavering, with a professional air, stepped between the two excited ladies. "There appears to be a double mystery here. Have you this note, Lady Pevensy?"

She held out a crumpled bit of paper. "But I don't care anything about this!" she cried petulantly. "I want my necklace found. Where's Mary Grey?"

Then Lady Ursula did a strange thing. Before Mr. Clavering could open the note, she snatched it from his hand and tore it into shreds.

"Well, really," he began, bristling with indignation, "you have very likely destroyed a valuable clue."

Lady Pevensy whirled upon him with increasing hysteria. "Archibald Clavering, don't stand there talking of clues that you don't know anything about. Do something! Find Mary Grey, if you can't do any more."

With ominous dignity Mr. Clavering advanced to the garden door.

"Forgive me, Mr. Clavering," burst forth Lady Ursula impulsively. "I did not know what

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I was doing. I — the loss of the necklace has completely upset me."

"Pray don't mention it, Lady Ursula," he returned stiffly. "You are not the only one who is upset." His glance, as it rested on Lady Pevensy, spoke volumes.

At that moment Mary Grey stepped through the doorway. There was a slight flush on her pale face and her eyes were very brilliant.

Lady Pevensy ran towards her. "The necklace has been stolen!" she proclaimed with hysterical wrath.

Mary Grey stopped short, staring at her.

"Do you hear?" demanded Lady Pevensy shrilly. "The necklace has been stolen!"

"I hear you, Lady Pevensy," replied Mary Grey in her quiet voice, and, brushing by her, went swiftly up the stairs.

"Well, of all the —" gasped Lady Pevensy.

But Mr. Clavering interrupted with a question. His mind had been working quickly. He scented a clue.

"Did you go to Lady Ursula's dressing-room?"

"Certainly, but she was not there. I thought it was strange and hurried back to my own room, thinking I might have misread the letter. I found the dressing-table drawer open and the necklace gone."

"Had the lock been forced?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course it had. Did you think the necklace walked through the keyhole?"

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Mr. Clavering grew red in an effort to swallow his indignation. "At just what time was this?" he persisted.

But Lady Pevensy's loss had put her in a most abominable temper. "For Heaven's sake, don't ask any more silly questions! Of course it wasn't more than ten minutes ago."

"If I am to assist you in the recovery of your necklace, Lady Pevensy," observed Mr. Clavering in his stiffest manner, "it will be necessary for me to ask you certain questions."

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Clavering," she flamed, with quite brutal frankness, "I hardly think you will be of the slightest assistance in recovering the necklace." Wherewith she fled up the stairs, sobbing dismally.

Mr. Clavering was now fairly apoplectic.

Lady Ursula laid a soothing hand on his arm. "Don't notice her, Mr. Clavering. She is too unstrung to realise what she is saying. When she is calmer, I am sure she will not only beg your pardon, but ask your assistance in recovering the necklace. She really has a high opinion of your detective powers," she added, in what was, perhaps, more a spirit of kindliness than of conviction.

But Mr. Clavering did not take it in this way. He brightened perceptibly. "You think so?"

"Did she not say as much before us all?" Lady Ursula evaded, with a faint smile.

"So she did," he assented, and, his self-esteem

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restored, began to follow the clue again by questioning Lady Ursula as to where she was when Lady Pevensy went to her room.

"With — my brother," she answered vaguely.

"I should like to know if your maid was in the room then," pondered Mr. Clavering.

"My maid?" A startled look flashed over her features. "I don't know, I am sure. It is quite likely. I left her there when — I went to my brother."

"Is your maid a reliable person?"

"Rose reliable?" she echoed slowly.

Her eyes darkened, and it seemed to Mr. Clavering that her beautiful face hardened.

"Rose is reliable — in the ordinary sense of the word," she said at length, in a cold voice. "She would not steal. I have never missed so much as a handkerchief in the three years that she has been with me. Surely you do not suspect her?"

"In a case like this it is well to suspect every one till they are proved innocent," observed Mr. Clavering, with a wisdom born of long study. "If you do not object, I should like to question this girl."

"Oh, I do not object." Yet there was a curious note of constraint in her voice. Ringing, she requested that Rose be sent down to the library.

The footman was gone some time. When he returned, his impassivity was manifestly shaken.

"Rose is not to be found, my Lady."

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"You mean she is not in my room?"

"She is not in the 'ouse, my Lady," dropping an "h" in his agitation.

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Clavering significantly.

"Rose gone!" ejaculated Lady Ursula in a tone of horror, and rushed excitedly up the stairs.

Mr. Clavering hastened after, but instead of following her to her room, turned into the east wing and went on to Lady Pevensy's. Observing that the door was open, he approached and asked, rather timidly, if he might enter and see if there were any clues to be discovered.

Lady Pevensy had recovered her temper, also settled her switch, so she not only granted him permission to search for clues, but even murmured an apology for her former tartness. Mr. Clavering accepted it magnanimously and remarked with gallantry that he should never rest till he saw the necklace sparkling about her throat.

As he entered the room, Mary Grey passed out. Their eyes met and the expression in hers was baffling — a half-mocking defiance, so he read it.

"A curious young woman," he mused, and made up his mind to observe her more closely.

To his chagrin, he was able to discover no clues in the room, nothing in any way bearing upon the mystery save the open and empty dressing-table drawer. The lock had been neatly forced by some burglar's implement, which was missing. As the diamond-paned windows looked down upon the terrace with a sheer drop of thirty feet, the thief

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must have entered by the door; in fact, he was probably concealed in the hall or some nearby chamber, waiting his chance, for although to reach the west wing where was Lady Ursula's room Lady Pevensy had been obliged to traverse the long main corridor, she declared that she had not been gone over ten minutes at the most.

In lieu of questioning Rose, Mr. Clavering insisted upon interviewing Lady Pevensy's elderly maid, Parkins; but to all appearance she was as innocent of the theft as her mistress. Moreover, it was to her that Lady Pevensy had first announced her loss, and she had found her diligently preparing the bath.

So Mr. Clavering, perforce, mentally crossed Parkins off the list of suspects, but underscored the name of Mary Grey.

"Did you," he inquired of Lady Pevensy, "notice when you stepped into the hall that any door near yours was ajar?"

"Mercy me!" she shivered, "do you think that the thief was hiding in one of the guests' rooms, watching for me to go out?"

"It is quite likely," he responded impressively.

Lady Pevensy was duly appalled and Mr. Clavering found difficulty in calming her sufficiently so that she might answer his question. He finally learned that she had observed one door ajar, the one directly opposite hers — Lord Meldrum's.

"But he was there himself," she asserted excitedly. "He looked up as I opened my door.

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When I came back, his was shut; it has been shut ever since."

Mr. Clavering felt that he must abandon the clue of doors ajar. It was hardly possible to suspect Lord Meldrum, reputed one of the wealthiest peers in the Kingdom, of connivance in the theft of the necklace. So he went back to the evolving of his first clue. Lady Ursula's maid had not disappeared without cause, and it was altogether probable that she was the deliverer of the decoy note, if not the actual thief.

Suddenly he remembered that the torn shreds of that note were even now lying upon the library floor where Lady Ursula's nervous fingers had flung them. The piecing together of those torn shreds should be his first step in the unravelling of this mystery.

But when he reached the library not a scrap of the note was to be found. He even got down on his knees in his immaculate evening clothes and peered under every article of furniture in the vain hope that a breeze from the open garden door had blown the bits of paper about.

"Have you lost something, Mr. Clavering?" suddenly asked a soft voice, with just the faintest suggestion of mockery.

Mr. Clavering hastily raised his flushed and perspiring face from the dusty depths beneath the escritoire. Mary Grey stood smiling in the garden doorway. As she repeated her question, Mr. Clavering rose to his feet with what dignity he

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could, and with his handkerchief carefully flecked the dust from the knees of his trousers. He was aware that his position had been a very ungraceful one for a man of his standing and — years, and it pleased him still less that this cool, self-possessed young woman, whose every glance at once angered and attracted him, should have discovered him at such a disadvantage. Worse than all, his hitherto always immaculate collar was actually wilted under the stress of his detective zeal. Archibald Clavering, the acknowledged Beau Brummell of the Portstead Manor house party, for the first time in his life blushed at himself. One thing only comforted him — Lady Pevensy was not there.

To hide his embarrassment he assumed a pompously stern air.

"I was searching, Miss Grey, for a letter which I had reason to believe I left here."

"Under the escritoire?" she queried sweetly.

Mr. Clavering was a gentleman and he restrained himself.

"Letters have been known to drop," he returned, acidly dignified.

"Quite so," she assented, and with another smile, was gone.

Mr. Clavering walked rapidly to the bell-rope, and when the footman appeared, once again his impassive self, he bade him find out if any of the maids had recently removed torn bits of paper from the library floor. The report of the inquiry

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