

The House of Whispers

By WILLIAM JOHNSTON

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A SECRET PASSAGE.

Synopsis.—Spalding Nelson is occupying the apartments of his great-uncle, Rufus Gaston. The Gastons, leaving on a trip, tell him about mysterious noises and "whispers" that have scared them. He becomes acquainted with Barbara Bradford, who lives in the same big building. He instinctively dislikes and distrusts the superintendent, Wick. The mysteries in his apartments begin with the disappearance of the Gaston pearls from the wall safe. He decides not to call in the police, but to do his own investigating. It is soon evident that someone has access to his rooms. Becoming friendly with Barbara, he learns that her apartments are equally mysterious. She tells him that several years before her sister, Claire, who lives with her, had made a hasty marriage with an adventurer, from whom she was soon parted, and the marriage had been annulled. Claire is engaged to be married and someone has stolen documents concerning the affair from the Bradford apartment and is attempting to blackmail the Bradfords. Nelson takes Miss Kelly, the telephone girl, to dinner with the idea of pumping her. Gorman, a hotel detective, recognizes her as the wife of Lefty Moore, a noted burglar. Nelson tells his story to Gorman.

CHAPTER VII—Continued.

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"And the number she called up—the private number—did you find out about that?"

"Sure, that was easy. It's one of the apartments in the Granddeck—Henry Kent's. Who's he?"

"I never heard of him. I'll try to find out, though."

"I would, but be careful how you go asking questions around the place. The Moore woman may have a pal. They generally work in pairs."

The ease and celerity with which Gorman had learned all these things about the girl impressed me greatly, and I said as much. He received my compliments with a deprecating wave of the hand.

"Nothing to it, boy, when you know the ropes. But last night you told me you had taken the girl out to try to pump something out of her. What was it? What's doing?"

From beginning to end I told him the whole story in all of its perplexing details, starting with the day that I had received my great-uncle Rufus' note that had led to the chance meeting with Miss Bradford, bringing in my discharge and the disappearance of the Gaston pearls, and explaining what made me think these facts were in some way involved with the attempt to blackmail the Bradfords.

"What do you make of it?" I asked as I ended my narrative. "Who do you think is at the bottom of it?"

"I don't think," he retorted, "that our business it does not pay to think too quick. You're apt to convict the wrong party."

"But you must think something," I protested.

"I think," he said slowly and meditatively, "that there's a lot of crooked work going on—I'll say that much. And you and Miss Bradford's pretty close to being the center of it."

"What can we do about it?"

"There's a way I learned from a lawyer that ain't bad. He'd take his client and put him in the center of a big circle with lines running in all directions—alibi, insanity, mistaken identity, no proof of guilt, lack of jurisdiction, escape on legal technicality—he'd mark out every possible defense. Then he'd follow each line out and see where it led and what plan the opposing lawyers would be likely to spring on him. Generally he got his man off."

"I don't quite see how that applies."

"You don't, eh?"

He traced an imaginary circle with his forefinger on the table in the little back room where we were sitting.

"Here's you and Miss Bradford in the center, surrounded by a lot of mysterious deviltry. We'll make two circles. This inside one is the things that have happened to both of you—the wall safes opened, the papers stolen, the pearls gone, the anonymous notes, the blackmail threats, the loss of your job, the voices you've heard. Now on this outer circle we'll mark down all the people who might be mixed up in these things—mind ye, I say only might be. First, there's Lefty Moore's woman—we know she's a crook. Then who do we know that knows her? There's at least two—Mr. Wick, the superintendent that hired her, and this Mr. Henry Kent, whose apartment she telephoned to. Then there's all the rest of the help in the house. Any one of them might be her pal. Then there's the flighty Bradford girl—"

"You don't suspect her, do you?" I cried, horrified at the prospect of his investigation taking this turn.

"Be easy," he retorted. "I'm not suspecting anyone. I'm only putting them down. There's the Bradford girl and her ex-husband. He's a bigamist and that makes him a crook. Those two men you saw in the park, one of them with a scar on his face—we'll run them down. You know a cafe the scar-faced man goes to, so

that's a start. There's the man who shadowed you—would you know him again if you saw him?"

"I shook my head doubtfully.

"I'm afraid not," I admitted, "you see—"

"Don't bother to explain. You either would or wouldn't, and that's all we need to know now. There's old Mr. Gaston and his wife. It's queer about their ducking out so suddenly and leaving no address, but maybe they're only scared. Let's see who else is there—the Bradford servants and the old man's, the old washerwoman—and the families who live in the house. We've got the circle pretty well covered, haven't we?"

More and more I had begun to appreciate how valuable the services of an experienced detective would be likely to be in helping to solve the mystery.

"Look here, Gorman," I said, "why can't you take charge of this case for us?"

"What's in it?" he asked.

My face fell, and my enthusiasm died a sudden death. Once more I was confronted by the specter of my poverty. Of what use my talking to a high-priced investigator like Gorman when all the money I had in the world was less than two hundred dollars, out of which I had to live until I found employment. Yet I must serve Barbara Bradford.

"If you clear up this case," I announced, "I'll give you every cent I've got in the world."

He shook his head.

"It ain't enough. If I take this case, it won't be for the money that's in it. For that matter I can get all I want from old Gaston for getting his pearls back. That'll be enough."

"Then you will take the case," I cried jubilantly.

"On one condition. That you'll promise to keep everything away from the police."

"I'll promise that for myself and Miss Bradford, too. That was the one reason she advanced against my telling you about things. She was afraid you'd call in the police."

"Never fear about that. There's nothing I'd like better than to put it over that bunch of young reformers they've got down in Center street. This hotel work don't suit me, anyhow. I've been thinking of opening up an office of my own. The recovery of the Gaston pearls would be a nice feather in my cap to start with."

"I see," I replied, "but you'll need money for expenses and that sort of thing, won't you? I have—"

"Leave that part of it to me," he retorted with a quizzical smile. "After all the years I was on the police force I ain't exactly broke by a long shot. All you've got to do is to keep your eyes open and let me know all that goes on in the apartment house. I'll attend to the rest. Don't do anything, though, without consulting me first."

"I'll gladly promise that."

"Good enough. We'd better arrange then to meet here every day at three sharp. It's as good a place as any."

"I'll be here."

"And look out you're not trailed. They may try shadowing you again."

"Who do you mean by 'they'?" I asked eagerly.

"They that trailed you yesterday," replied Gorman with a grin. "If you don't know, I don't know either—yet."

From his manner I was confident that he already had a shrewd suspicion as to the identity of some of the miscreants. The maze in the center of which he had placed Miss Bradford and myself meant far more to him, undoubtedly, than it did to me. More than likely his vast knowledge of the methods of criminals and his acquaintanceship with others like Lefty Moore had given him clues enough as to where to look for the plotters. I realized that it would be useless to question him further. He would admit suspecting no one until he was sure of their guilt, a quality I admired greatly.

"You can count on me," I repeated. "I'll be here at three tomorrow."

Yet how foolish it was for any of us to predict what we will be doing or where we will be twenty-four hours from now. Seldom do things happen in the routine of our lives as we had anticipated. I was not there the next day at the time appointed. By no possibility could I have been there, however much I might have wished to. Many things had happened in quick succession.

How it came about that my promise to meet Gorman went unfulfilled can best be explained by narrating the events of the evening after I returned to the Granddeck. It was nearly five when I left the detective. I strolled leisurely down town and had dinner in the cafe where on one occasion I had seen the scar-faced man. I lingered there for a long time over my coffee hoping in vain that he might appear. I even ventured to cautiously question the waiter and head waiter, describing the man as best I could, but both of them insisted that they never had seen any such person. As I walked home I kept a wary eye out to make sure I was not being followed, but apparently no one was now shadowing me.

It was nine-thirty when I reached home. It had been arranged that Barbara about ten would signal me that we might have a chat from our respective windows. As I sat in my room waiting for the time to come, I was reviewing the case in all its aspects. Indeed there was hardly a waking moment that I was not thinking of the many mysteries about us. I was wondering if, when the case was cleared up the mysterious whispers that we all had heard would also be explained. I recalled Claire Bradford's unexpected visit to my apartment the evening before and her confusion when I had captured her. I wondered if the explanations she had offered had been the truth. Was she really trying to locate the source of the whispers? I looked interested up at the section of the wall that I had found her inspecting. What had she hoped to discover there?

I decided to make a close inspection of both sides of the wall. As I lit up the sitting room and hall for this purpose, something unusual came to my notice that had hitherto escaped me entirely.

THE INNER WALL OF MY ROOM—the one running along the hall of the apartment—HAD THE APPEARANCE OF BEING AT LEAST FOUR FEET THICK.

It seemed so absurd that I refused to believe the evidence my eyes had given me. In these modern days of steel construction there was no reason for a wall being of medieval proportions. I sprang to my great-aunt's work basket and began rummaging to see if I could find a tape measure, and luckily my search was quickly rewarded.

I sketched a rough diagram of the rear rooms, and began measuring them off, carefully checking my figures as I went along. I found myself growing wildly excited as the tape measure confirmed what my eyes already had told me. The inner wall was at least four feet thick.

With her pretty face flushed at the terms of endearment that had unwittingly escaped me, she laughingly released herself from my arms.

"That was nothing," she said in a tense whisper. "Where's the panel?"

Relieved to find that she was not angered by my presumption, I hastened to turn up the light and pointed at the hole in the wall. As I had done, she sprang up on the chair and endeavored to push the panel further back, but was unable to budge it. Quicker witted than I, she then tried sliding it along. At the slightest touch it slid back in a groove, revealing the opening—leading into what?

Striking a match, we both of us peered in. The space between the walls was certainly high enough and wide enough for a man to walk there in comfort. So far as the flickering light of the match enabled us to judge, it ran the length of the hall, and near its further end there appeared to be some steps.

"Come," cried the intrepid Barbara, "let's explore it."

"No," I said firmly. "We must do nothing until I have seen the detective. We have put the case in his hands."

"But we must find out about it," protested the girl.

"Tomorrow," I said. "We know where it is. We know where the voices and whispers come from now."

"I wonder," she said thoughtfully, "if there is the same sort of a passageway in our apartment?"

"Promise me that if you find there is one, you will not attempt to explore it alone."

As we argued about it we both stopped short and with blanching faces listened. From somewhere—it sounded as if it was right below us—we heard sounds as if two people were struggling. Then came a woman's shriek, a wild scream with the death terror in it. The sound seemed close at hand. It seemed to come right up from the opening in the panel by which we were standing.

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Once more there came an awful scream—a scream stopped short as if some brutal hand had throttled the woman's throat.

"What is it?" cried Barbara.

"Listen," I commanded. "It seems to come from the floor below."

Holding our breaths we strained our ears for further sounds. Suddenly a shot rang out, and there was a thud as if a body had fallen to the floor. Then all was silence.

With terror in our faces we turned to each other, seeking an explanation which neither could give.

"Mother—Claire!" cried Barbara. "They'll be alarmed. I must go back to them at once."

As I did so I could not help laughing at the idea that a modern apartment building might contain a secret passage was utterly ridiculous, yet as I pounded lightly on the wall it gave forth a hollow sound, vastly different from any other part of the room. I was convinced that between my room and the hall there was space enough at least for a passageway in which a man might walk.

I surveyed with growing interest the wooden paneling that in my room ran clear up to the ceiling. In the other rooms there was no paneling. Mounting the chair again I pressed sharply against the wood at the point from which the sound had seemed to come. It seemed to me it gave a little to my touch. I struck one of the sections a sharp blow. It dropped back a full half-inch, leaving what looked like a doorway—a space three feet wide by five feet high. The bottom of the opening was hardly two feet from the floor. If there was a passageway here, this panel certainly would explain how my rooms had been surreptitiously visited.

Feverishly I worked at the panel trying to push it further back. If there was a passageway there in the wall I was determined to see whether it led.

My efforts to move the panel further failed. As I worked at it I heard a tapping on my window sill.

It must be Barbara. In my excitement over the find I had forgotten all about the time. I sprang from the chair and rushed to the window. I found her peering out, trying to ascertain why I had not answered her signal.

"She's been murdered. Get the police quick."

TO BE CONTINUED.

Taught Chinese Lacemaking.

The art of lacemaking was first taught to the Chinese of the Chefoo district by foreign missionaries about twenty-five years ago. They believed that by teaching lacemaking the women and girls would find profitable employment within their own homes, and the subsequent spread of the industry has fully justified their efforts.

Although first taught in Chefoo, Chi Hsia Hsien was the first district in which lace was extensively made.

Time Measured by Candles.

The Chinese, besides using water clocks, also invented joss-sticks, which burned uniformly. The joss-stick is somewhat similar to what good old King Alfred of England is said to have used way back in the eighth century.

He was a great educator, and discovered how to divide the time which he allowed his nobles in which to make complaints against each other.

Planting Trees on Prairies.

In order to demonstrate to farmers on the plains the advisability and feasibility of planting trees on the prairies of the West, the Canadian Forestry association is sending a demonstration car on a tour of the three western provinces. A railway coach is being fitted up with a moving picture outfit, lecture hall, and a miniature nursery. The car will travel over the bulk of the western railway lines.

Remiss Actions.

"There are some queer things about the actions of nature."

"Name some, for instance."

"That she does not put lids on the chest instead of the eye, and that she doesn't make shingles come on the roof of the mouth."

Cynical Assent.

She—Do you believe a woman could make a success of an idea for a flying machine?

He—Why not? Most of women's ideas incline to the flighty.

BEAR HEAVY LOAD

Some of the Trials of Present-Day Executives.

Man Who Complained That There Were No Efficient People in the World Had Some Excuse for His Bitterness—Trouble is Moral.

Several years ago, when I had just been promoted to my first real job, I called on a business friend of mine. He is a wise and experienced handler of men. I asked him what suggestions he could make about executive responsibility, writes Bruce Barton, in the Red Book.

"You are about to make a great discovery," he said. "Within a week or two you will know why it is that executives grow gray and die before their time. You will have learned the bitter truth that there are no efficient people in the world."

I am still very far from admitting that he was right, but I know well enough what he meant. Every man knows, who has ever been responsible for a piece of work or had to meet a pay roll.

Recently another friend of mine built a house. The money to build it represented a difficult period of saving on the part of himself and his wife; it meant overtime work and self-denial