

The House of Whispers

By WILLIAM JOHNSTON

Copyright by Little, Brown & Co.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

—11—

"I guess so," said Wick. "That's where his room is. He's only been here in the Granddeck a few days. I don't know much about him."

"And that's all you know about it?" said the detective, turning to me again.

I hesitated. Should I or should I not tell them of the wall safe that I had seen Mr. Wick closing? There was no way I could prove it. Undoubtedly Wick would deny having done so. It would be his word against mine. As superintendent his word would undoubtedly carry. I decided it would be best to withhold my information to a more propitious time.

"That's all I know, except what Mr. Wick has told you," I said.

"Very well," said the detective in charge. "You can go now, and you, too, Doctor."

Mr. Wick was escorting the doctor to the door. The detectives had withdrawn to the room where the body lay and were holding a whispered conference. I stepped quickly to the wall safe, and making sure that I was unobserved, tested the knob. It was securely fastened. I congratulated myself on having said nothing about it. Wick, I felt certain, would deny having shut it, and there was no proof that it had been opened when we had entered.

As I returned to my own apartment upstairs, nearing the top of the short flight of steps between the floors I was astounded to see a female figure flitting across the hall and entering the Bradford apartment. Though I had opportunity for only a brief glimpse, I recognized her at once. It was Claire Bradford.

The door of my apartment was standing wide open. I remembered that as I had run downstairs a few moments ago, I had neglected to close it after me. From the direction in which she had come, it was plain that Claire Bradford had been paying another surreptitious visit to my quarters. What could have been her purpose? There must have been some strong impelling motive to make her dare the perilous journey along the window ledge, and now, at the imminent risk of discovery, to pay me a second visit. I began seriously to doubt whether the explanation she had offered me was the true one. I was beginning to feel that there was more than a possibility that she was again in the clutches of the unscrupulous rascal who had once been her husband.

Greatly puzzled, I made a hasty survey of the apartment, but could find nothing that appeared to have been disturbed. Going back to my own room I hastened to place a handkerchief out of my window as a signal to Barbara, for I knew she would be anxious to know the meaning of the sounds we had heard below. In a very few moments I heard the tap of her riding-crop on my sill and hurried to answer.

"What was it?" she asked in an excited whisper.

"Daisy Lutan, an actress, who lived on the floor below, has been murdered shot."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know. Mr. Wick and I went into the apartment together. There was no one there."

"How terrible!" she exclaimed.

"It is, indeed," I answered, "but it may help us."

"What do you mean?"

"With the police in the house making investigations, there'll be no more threats from the blackmailers for a while. They won't dare bother you for the present."

"Do you really think so?" she questioned with a little sigh of relief.

"I'm sure of it."

"Have the police been called in?"

"Yes; two detectives are downstairs now."

"I'm glad," she said. "With the detectives here, they won't dare molest us, will they?"

"Of course not," I answered. "Is your sister at home?"

"Yes," she answered. "Our guests have just gone. Mother has retired, and Claire is in the living room writing a note. They heard nothing, so I did not tell them anything about it."

"That was wise. They'll hear it soon enough. Has your sister been in the apartment all evening?"

"She hasn't been out all day unless she went out just to drop the letter she was writing down the mail chute in the hall. Why do you ask?"

"I was merely wondering if there was any way she could learn of the murder."

"How could she? Isn't that too terrible about Miss Lutan? But I mustn't talk any longer. Good night."

"Wait a moment," I cried. "There are some things I must discuss with you before I meet Gorman. How about meeting me at the Astor at eleven?"

"I can't promise, but I'll try. Good night!"

There was nothing further that I could do, and I felt sadly in need of rest. Throwing off my coat and waistcoat I began making preparations for bed. The notion took me to once more investigate the secret passageway. I pushed sharply on the panel as I had

done before, but this time I could not budge it. I tugged and worked and pounded, but it stuck fast in spite of all my efforts. As I was struggling to force it open, there came a sharp ring at the bell of the apartment. As I was, in my shirt sleeves, I answered it. The two detectives I had seen downstairs stood there.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I arrest you for the murder of Daisy Lutan," said one of them, and with that they sprang forward and pinned my arms.

"Why, this is absurd," I laughed in their faces, conscious of my utter innocence of the crime. "I had nothing to do with it."

"That remains to be seen. Put on your coat and come along."

Still holding me fast, they went back with me to my bedroom. Clutching me tight they made me put on my coat, and no sooner had I done so than one of them snapped handcuffs on me.

"Look at this, Jim," said one of them, pointing to a spot on the front of my coat.

"That's blood all right," said the other, after inspecting it.

"I got that when I was helping Mr. Wick lift the body to the couch," I protested.

"Tell that to the judge," the detective called Jim scoffed. "Better look around for the gun, Cullen."

"You'll find no gun here," I cried. "I never owned one."

Nevertheless Cullen began rummaging through the drawers of my dresser. Suddenly he gave a triumphant exclamation and drew something from beneath a pile of shirts in the second drawer.

"Here it is," he announced, holding



"Here it is," he announced, holding up before my astonished eyes an automatic revolver.

"I never saw it before," I gasped.

The detective merely laughed.

"There's one bullet gone," said the man who was examining it.

"Come along, young fellow," said the other detective gruffly. "The bullet settles it. We've got the right party."

CHAPTER IX.

A prisoner in a police station cell, I passed a sleepless night. Conscious as I was of my utter innocence and confident of my speedy release, nevertheless I had to admit that the detectives from their point of view were perfectly justified in placing me under arrest.

For a burglar to have gained access to the apartments without the connivance of the employees seemed almost an impossibility. For him to have escaped from the building after having murdered Miss Lutan without being detected seemed also highly improbable. Then, too, there was the damning evidence of the blood on my coat and the fact that I had been found at the door of the apartment. I had not observed the stain on my clothing until the detectives discovered it. My explanation of how it had gotten there was the true one, yet I could readily realize that it might sound fishy to others.

On the face of it the tragedy in the Granddeck looked like an inside job. The revolver, with one bullet missing, was the strongest sort of evidence that I was the murderer. Yet I never had seen the weapon before and could not imagine who could have placed it there. There was only one explanation possible. It had been purposely planted there with the definite object of throwing suspicion on me.

The one person—the only person—whom I knew to have been in my rooms after the murder was committed was Claire Bradford. Could she have done it? I remembered that Barbara had showed me a revolver in her possession. I wondered if this could be the same weapon. I did not think it possible that Claire herself could have used it. I could imagine no motive why Claire Bradford would want to kill Miss Lutan, yet it must have been she who had hidden the revolver in my dresser. What had been her motive?

How had she got possession of the revolver after the murder?

Come what may, I had no intention of telling any one—not even Gorman—or Claire's second visit to my apartment. For Barbara's sake I made up my mind I would keep my lips closed about that incident, even if I had to stay in prison indefinitely. At the police station when the detectives had brought me in, I had quietly but firmly refused to answer any questions, although they had badgered me for nearly two hours before they let me alone.

"Where did you live before you came to the Granddeck?"

"Where did you work?"

"Where do your people live?"

"Why did you kill Daisy Lutan?"

"Where did you get the money you have?"

"We've got the goods on you. Why don't you confess?"

These were the sort of questions that were flung at me, first by one and then the other. Evidently at first they had had hopes of breaking me down.

"I have nothing to say," had been my unvarying answer to all their questions.

Finally they gave it up and locked me in a cell for the night, leaving me thankful that the honor of being a suspected murderer relieved me from sharing a cell with some of the frowsy prisoners I saw brought past my barred door.

"Haven't you any friends you would like to have notified?" was the last question they asked as they left me.

"I have nothing to say," I repeated once more.

Nor was this answer this time mere stubbornness. Who was there that I could notify of my plight? Birge and Roller, my two intimates, were somewhere on the high seas. The men whom I had known in the office where I had worked, for obvious reasons, were not to be called on. I had no idea of the whereabouts of my aged relatives beyond the fact that they were somewhere in Maine.

I had no intention whatever of communicating the fact of my arrest to my mother. Indeed, I was hoping that she would not hear of it until after my innocence was established.

I thought of Gorman. I would have been glad of his counsel, but I remembered that I did not know where he lived. He had told me he was giving up his position at the hotel. It would be useless to try to find him until morning.

Yet in spite of my apparent friendlessness, although to all appearances there was no one in New York to whom I could turn in this time of trouble, it was a wonderful comfort to feel that I was sure of one staunch friend—Barbara Bradford.

Although we had been acquainted but a few days, and although hardly a word of love had passed between us, I knew that her feeling for me already was something greater than friendship. I knew that she trusted me and that she would remain faithful in her affection for me, no matter what accusations were brought against me. I had been madly in love with her from almost the first time I saw her. Whatever happened, I must keep her out of it. I must find some means of warning her to say nothing to any one. I knew that her first impulse would be to come to my rescue, regardless of the fact that in establishing an alibi for me she would be blasting her own reputation. Under no circumstances, even if I was convicted, must she be permitted to speak. No explanation can account for the presence of a young girl alone in a man's rooms at eleven o'clock at night, even though she and I both knew how utterly undeserving of censure her presence there was and how important had been her motive in coming there.

Mention of Barbara's name in any way in connection with a murder case would be certain to wreck her sister's matrimonial plans. It would mean the ruin of her mother's ambitions and the unmasking of the parlous condition of their finances. It would mean that the reproaches of her mother and sister would be heaped on my Barbara's poor head.

I was still unsatisfied in my own mind as to just what part Claire Bradford was playing in the web of mystery about us. She was emotional and flighty, given to doing rash things. I felt that there was a strong possibility that relations with her ex-husband had been in some way re-established. I felt at times that she was being used as a tool by the conspirators in the Granddeck mysteries. If Claire was involved in any way, it behooved me to move carefully lest she should be betrayed in my efforts to clear myself.

There was nothing for me to do but to sit tight and take my plight as philosophically as I could until I could get in touch with Gorman. As soon as it was morning, I bribed a jail attendant to bring me a morning newspaper. On the first page I found an account of the murder under glaring headlines and read it with intense interest, my conviction growing with each line that I read that the

police case against me was far better backed up than I ever imagined it could be.

Then and there I made up my mind never again to believe anything on purely circumstantial evidence. No one knew better than I how utterly innocent I was of that crime, how upright my conduct in New York had been, and how honest my motives for all my recent actions had been; this is what I read in the newspaper:

BURGLAR MURDERS WELL-KNOWN ACTRESS

Miss Daisy Lutan Found Mysteriously Shot in her Luxurious Apartment in the Granddeck.

Marks on Throat Where Murderer Had Choked Her

Police Arrest John S. Nelson, a Clerk Out of Work, in Whose Room They Found a Revolver.

Daisy Lutan, an actress, whose matrimonial affairs recently brought her much notoriety, was found last night murdered in her apartment in the Granddeck. She had been instantly killed by a bullet wound through the heart, and there were marks on her throat where her assailant had tried to choke her. John S. Nelson, a clerk out of work, who had been acting as caretaker for one of the tenants in the building, was arrested.

There was blood on his coat when Detectives Cullen and Edwards took him prisoner, and they found in his room a revolver with one chamber empty hidden under a pile of shirts in the dresser.

The apartment Nelson is occupying is directly above that of Miss Lutan.

The police theory is that Nelson let himself into the apartment by swinging down from his window, and that Miss Lutan, returning unexpectedly, found him ransacking her rooms.

The crime was discovered by James Wick, superintendent of the apartment house, who was in the elevator when he heard screams followed by a shot. Getting out of the elevator to investigate he found Nelson at the door of the Lutan apartment.

Nelson glibly explained that he had heard a shot and was trying to see where it had come from. Mr. Wick's suspicions were aroused by his manner, and he made Nelson come with him into the apartment and kept him there until the arrival of the police.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson, and he stubbornly refuses to make any statement about himself. He was employed only a few days ago by Rufus Gaston as caretaker for his apartment. As Mr. Gaston is absent from the city it cannot be learned how he happened to give Nelson employment. The police believe he may have obtained the position through false references or other means.

Little is known at the Granddeck about young Nelson,