

# THE TANGLED WEB

By Ethel Watts-Mumford Grant  
Author of "Duper," "Whitewash," Etc.

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## CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Evelyn rang. "These maids are to be questioned further. You will keep them in the servants' hall until I give further orders. And Vreeman," she continued, "when the detectives come, you are to offer no opposition to whatever they may desire to investigate. You, we, are all under suspicion until the affair can be cleared up."

Under escort of the butler the hysterical suspects were removed, and the ladies returned to the drawing room. Alice, her hands in her pockets, stood before the open fire.

"Well," she said dryly, "when do you wish to go through me, Mrs. Lawdon? And Mrs. Gaynor, have you had the X-rays turned on her? We may have swallowed your jewels, you know."

Miss Rawlins's angry sarcasm fell upon unresponsive ears.

"Where's my husband?" Mrs. Lawdon demanded sharply. "I'm not going to waste another minute—not one—I want the proper authorities, that's what I'm after." A curious servant passed the door. "You, John, go and find Mr. Lawdon. Tell him I want him here at once." The servant disappeared, and Mrs. Lawdon turned with evil triumph upon Mrs. Evelyn. "Now, I'm going to take things in hand, and something's going to happen."

"Rather more than you imagine," said Mrs. Evelyn resignedly. "However, I have nothing more to say. The loss has been yours, it occurred in my house. You may act exactly as you see fit."

"I hope you happen to have a photograph of yourself wearing regalia," observed Alice. "It will be a great comfort to the reporters. By the way, Patti? Who do you wish to take charge of the interviews? We will be in a state of siege by to-



"LOOK! LOOK!" STAMMERED EVELYN, "IS SHE DEAD?"

morrow, and some one must pay exclusive attention to the telephone."

Mr. Lawdon entered hurriedly.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but all the rooms have been searched, and—"

His wife cut him short. "Please notify the police at once, and have the best detectives sent down. I don't want a minute lost."

He shot a deprecating glance at his hostess. That lady was as indifferent as ever. "You may do as you please. We can only assure you of our co-operation. You will have to notify Mineola, I suppose, and get your own people from New York. Not having ever found it necessary to do such a thing before, I can give but little advice."

"Save your breath for interviews," said Alice. "I'm glad I usually look well in a snapshot."

Mrs. Gaynor rose from the deep chair where she had dropped on entering the drawing-room.

"If Mrs. Lawdon will permit, I would like to retire. These scenes have been too much for my strength, I am afraid. But, of course, if you object—"

"You treat me as if it were I who had committed a crime," flamed Mrs. Lawdon. "I'd like to know if you'd lose a fortune like that, if you wouldn't insist on something being done? You haven't the right to—sneer at me. Of course, you're not interested. You didn't lose anything. Don't let me keep you up, please."

Alice turned affectionately to Mrs. Gaynor. "Do go to bed—you're done. If you could see how terribly you look. It's a shame this thing should have come up now."

"Do go," added Mrs. Evelyn. "I'll stay here. With me and Alice as hostages of good faith. Mrs. Lawdon should be satisfied."

Mr. Lawdon presented his arm, his kindly face working with concern and mortification. "Let me help you, Nellie," he said softly. "I'm

that sorry—dear me, I'd buy the little girl her kit twice over if she'd only come to her senses. But she's too upset. You'll forgive her, won't you?" he whispered as they reached the door. "She doesn't mean any harm, but she's all upset, and she's a perfect kid, Nellie, a perfect kid."

"Oh, that's all right," she smiled brightly. "We'll all be adjusted in the morning. Good night."

"Good night," he murmured. "Good night. Hope they didn't disturb your finery too much in their search. We fine-tooth-combed the whole place without respect to age, sex, or previous condition of servitude. Good night again." He withdrew, and Nellie slowly moved toward the stairs.

Her hands shook as if palsied as she reached for the carved newel post, her knees weakened and she sank upon the lower step, burying her face in her hands, too weak to rise and proceed in the search for her sorely needed rest. After a moment of complete relaxation, she pulled herself together, conscious that the dizziness that numbed her throbbing brain might at any moment gain control. She stood for a moment leaning her whole weight on the balustrade, when a sudden commotion roused all her dormant energies.

Adele's voice rose in hysterical protest. "Madame! Madame! Oh, Madame!" The maid came down the corridor, spied her mistress, and rushed to her as refuge. Behind her came Wendham. "Oh, Madame!"

The girl gasped, "what do you think John—John, the second man, said to me? Oh, ma'am, he nudged up to me and said: 'I saw you, my girl, when you went into that room. Now, I haven't peached, and you divide with me.' That's what he said, ma'am. He accused me, he did, and as God sees me, Mrs. Gaynor, it isn't true. I was asleep there all the time. I was, I was. Oh, you don't believe him, ma'am, you don't—oh, say you don't!"

Mrs. Gaynor swayed, clutching at the banisters. "John says he saw you go in?" Her voice was sharp with something more than surprise.

Wendham caught her by the arm, and leaning over, gently pushed back the woman's arms that sought to catch and cling to her mistress' knees.

"Don't, my girl—quiet, quiet—calm down now. Don't be frightened." His voice soothed the terrified creature like magic. She raised her head fixing her tearful eyes upon his. Her tension relaxed suddenly. "John probably thought you did rob Mrs. Lawdon and just took a flyer to see if you'd weaken and divide with him if you had. You must control yourself. Mrs. Gaynor believes in you, I know she does. Be calm now." His eyes held hers as if fascinated. Slowly she drooped forward.

"Come, come," Mrs. Gaynor's voice broke in. "Adele, what nonsense. You mustn't allow people to frighten you like that. It's just as the doctor says. Of course, we know you're innocent. Go back and stay with the others, since Mrs. Lawdon wishes it."

The girl rubbed her hand across her eyes and rose unsteadily. "Yes'm," she said. "Please excuse me, I was all took back."

"It's all right, Adele." Mrs. Gaynor's voice had regained its former gentleness. "Go back, and don't run away like that again. If anything more is said, insist on seeing me. Good night."

The servant turned and went slowly away.

"Nellie," said Wendham slowly, "for Heaven's sake go to your room before anything more happens! I cannot bear to see you in this condition. It breaks my heart." He raised her unresisting hand to his lips. "Come, dear, come."

With his help she mounted the easy stairs and crossed the hallway to her room. At the door she paused and turned to him.

"I'm not worth your kindness, really, I'm not. Oh!" she cried passionately. "I wish I were dead, I wish I were dead—but I haven't the courage. Good night, and thank you."

The troubled household was at last at rest, but Wendham found sleep impossible. "Let's sit it out, Cass," he suggested. Mr. Evelyn jumped at the suggestion. "A nightcap and a chat—I need soothing." Setting themselves in easychairs before the fire, they remained silent, each deep in thought.

Evelyn spoke suddenly. "I've got a piece of news for you, Boyd—and I am sorry it's—what it is!"

Wendham looked up anxiously. His host recrossed his legs. "I learned something a little while ago. You remember when Vreeman called me to the door? Well, John, the second man, wanted to see me; said he had something to say; excused himself for not speaking before, but he hated to speak on a fellow worker—and all that sort of rot. Upshot of it was, he says he saw Adele, Mrs. Gaynor's maid, come out of the Lawdon's room where we were all at dinner, and before Mary came up to prepare the rooms. Direct contradiction of what she says, you see."

The scene in the hall when the incensed maid had flown to her beloved mistress with her story came clearly before Wendham. That the girl was truly and frankly resentful was evident; that she spoke in all simpleness of soul had been equally obvious. This story, then, what was it? Had the man, knowing that his intended victim had once told of the whole encounter, deemed it safer for himself to seek equal publicity and stick to the story? It seemed

so, and yet, might not this be part of an oversubtly scheme to divert attention from himself? Wendham's reverie lasted so long that Evelyn was annoyed.

"You don't seem interested in my latest information," he said at length.

The physician started. "I wonder—I wonder—" again he was lost in thought. "Do you know," he said suddenly, "I'd question that man very carefully. Have him here." He glanced at the clock. "It's very late, never mind," he added.

"What's the odds?" said Evelyn. "He and Vreeman are sitting up guarding the suspects, at Mrs. Lawdon's request." He rang. "Send John here," he ordered as the butler appeared.

## CHAPTER VII.

A moment later the valet entered the room. His face was sullen and determined.

"Yes, sir, I'm here, sir."

"John," ordered Evelyn, "tell Dr. Wendham what you told me."

"Yes, sir, certainly, sir. I came up with the ice-water trays, sir, about nine, as it might be, and Mrs. Gaynor's young woman, Adele, sir, was just leaving Mrs. Lawdon's room. She crossed ahead of me. 'Good evenin',' says I. She goes right on as if I wasn't there. 'What's your grouch?' says I; but she'd gone down the corridor."

"How far away were you?" inquired Wendham.

"Oh, quite the length of the hall, sir, and the lights were low, only the far electric lights being lit, sir. But I couldn't be mistaken, no sir."

"Could anyone have impersonated her walk, do you think?"

The man shook his head emphatically.

"No? Well, tell me and your employer here, what did you mean by going to her and telling her you'd seen her, and that if she'd divide you don't keep quiet?"

Evelyn, who knew nothing of these developments, sat up suddenly with an exclamation of surprise. The valet reddened, but was evidently prepared for the question.

"I was hopin' to get a confession, sir," he answered glibly. "Then I'd had the whole thing in me hand, and no doubt Mr. Lawdon would have rewarded—you understand. I'm not grasin', sir, but I thought as if detectives and police were comin'—"

"What did she say—what did the woman say?" interrupted Evelyn eagerly.

"Up in the air like a coit, sir. Wouldn't have none of it. I'd insulted her, and she'd go to her mistress—an' she did," he added ruefully. "Then I came straight to you, sir."

"Wendham, do you hear that?" Evelyn exclaimed.

"I was there when it happened—or rather, when she ran to Mrs. Gaynor with the story. She was, as John says, up in the air."

"What did Nellie say?" inquired Evelyn.

Wendham's face clouded. "Mrs. Gaynor isn't strong, as I've told you. This evening has been terribly hard on her. I was afraid that this final complication would prove the last straw, but she pulled herself up like a thoroughbred, told Adele that she had absolute confidence in her, and then ordered her back to remain under Mrs. Lawdon's supervision."

"What do you make of it?" asked Evelyn. Wendham hesitated, and his host read his wishes.

"You may leave us, John. Thank you. Good night."

The servant bowed and retired.

"I don't know what to think," said Wendham, reverting to the last question; "but this I do believe, that girl is as innocent as you are. She was beside herself with shame and indignation, and it was genuine. I'm far more inclined to suspect John."

It was Evelyn's turn to fall into a brown study, from which he emerged with his friend's words upon his lips. "I wonder—I wonder. That would be a foxy game, wouldn't it? But has he the sense? Supposing this man did see some one, and that one wasn't Adele? Who could it be? If a man, then small and slender enough to dress and pass for a girl; if a woman, one who was either in our employ or who dressed as a maid. It's beyond me. Suppose the things were stolen by some one in the house—Adele, let us say, or John—what would they do with them? No one has left the place, the robbery was discovered so soon."

"Of course," said Wendham, "they're hidden, and, of course, in a place that would not be likely to be thought of, at least in any superficial search, such as we made tonight. This has been planned, Heaven knows how long ahead, and the receptacle chosen. If John is the guilty one, I would incline to the garden—an old well, the cellar. I once heard of a butler who put stolen diamonds into a bottle of port, corked it, and resealed it, marked it, and put it with the other bottles. Unfortunately the very next day the master happened to take out that bottle from the back row—and there you are. It was mere luck. We may be as fortunate. If, on the contrary, it's Adele, there's no telling."

Wendham looked up anxiously. His host recrossed his legs. "I learned something a little while ago. You remember when Vreeman called me to the door? Well, John, the second man, wanted to see me; said he had something to say; excused himself for not speaking before, but he hated to speak on a fellow worker—and all that sort of rot. Upshot of it was, he says he saw Adele, Mrs. Gaynor's maid, come out of the Lawdon's room where we were all at dinner, and before Mary came up to prepare the rooms. Direct contradiction of what she says, you see."

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"Oh, well, what's the use? Let's go to bed, old man. I'm down and out." Evelyn rose, stretched himself, and suppressed a yawn. "Look here comes the dawn. Was ever any

thing better than that? Corot is a back number, as Alice would say."

The great plain far below the hill was wrapped in blue night, grading to purple. A thread of scarlet touched its uttermost rim, while above the clouds melted to tones of opal. Higher yet, the almost white sky was limpid as a moonstone. The two men stood by the window a moment, then simultaneously turned away. "Good night—excuse me, good day, old man. Thanks for your help and your pleasant company."

"Don't mention it," said Wendham. "There's something stewing at the back of my brain. I think I'll have an idea soon. If I do, I'll let you know. They've not been of much use so far. Good day."

They sought their rooms. Wendham's brain was too active for sleep. Instead, after cold plunge, he seated himself, wrapped in a heavy bath robe, by the window and watched the miracle of morning.

Suddenly the inward self, as after huge and hidden labor, supplied a recollection. Apparently it was not connected with the case in mind. It seemed rather, in the effort to reach the thing desired, the dislodgment of another memory from its cell.

"Why, of course, Mrs. Wimbleton was the woman whom the famous French specialist had once named as the most gifted hypnotist of his acquaintance." Yes that was the name. He had not been able to place it—it was a wonder. Who would have connected Mrs. Gaynor with a science as remote from her interests, or with any one so devoted to it pursuits? Wimbleton—the name on the envelope entrusted to his care, had usedlessly haunted him. The strange, relentless personality that dwells in us all, pushed aside his conventional wonderings and thoughts. He found himself suddenly confronted by the vision of the maid as she clung to Mrs. Gaynor's knees—of the strange relaxation of her body, when with gentle, forceful firmness he had ordered her to be quiet. He recalled the anxiety of her gaze. He had no thought of compelling her will, other than his wish to spare the woman he loved a painful scene which might break down the slender barrier of self-control that still protected her throbbing nerves—no thought but this great desire. With astonishment, the girl had bent to his suggestion. He recalled the sharp, almost frightened tone in which Mrs. Gaynor had mentally seized and shaken the prostrate servant, breaking the spell his voice and presence were closing about her predisposed personality. She knew then—she realized what was happening—what might happen! "Am I insane?" he said aloud. He thrust back the tumultuous thoughts that lashed and seared in brain and heart.

Again he was forced to see and to fit another piece into the puzzle. Mrs. Gaynor had spent nearly a year abroad—in Paris, three years ago, while he was following his medico-psychical research in Vienna. So much Calvin Mortimer had told him. That was the time when Mrs. Wimbleton had studied with Berlihan. They must have known each other there. It was fair to suppose

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