



THE
MYSTERY
OF ROOM
75

FRED M. WHITE

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The Mystery of Room 75

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I - THE "AGONY" COLUMN

Wendover was feeling just a little good-natured contempt for himself. He would not have cared to admit that he had been following the girl down the Strand, but it was more or less the fact, though he had not the least intention of speaking to her, or molesting her in any way. Paul Wendover was a University man, and a gentleman, and he had the healthiest contempt for the class of cad who does that sort of thing.

He was following the slim figure with the tinge of titian red in her hair in the direction of Fleet-street out of a spirit of mingled curiosity and admiration--that intangible something where woman is concerned that always moves man, sooner or later, even though he happens to be a busy journalist, with his whole soul wrapped up in his profession. Wendover would have indignantly denied that he had fallen head over ears in love with a stranger whose features he had not even seen, except a fleeting glance at a perfect little profile, the vision of a slim and slender figure, and a mass of hair that seemed to have caught the sunshine and retained it.

And so Wendover wandered on, keeping the girl in sight on the off-chance, perhaps, of meeting some casual acquaintance who knew her. He had heard of such things, and fortune is always on the side of those seekers after adventure who pursue her steadily. Moreover, it was a case where Satan finds some mischief still, for idle hands to do, because Paul was taking more or less of a holiday after a long spell of strenuous work on the Continent, where he had been investigating certain anarchists' haunts on behalf of his paper, 'The Daily Herald.' He spoke half a dozen languages fluently, he was skilled in various disguises, and he asked for nothing better than to take his life in his hands

occasionally, whenever there was danger to be found. In short, he was the star man on the 'Herald,' a brilliant descriptive writer, and an athlete to his finger tips. He had just wound up a successful investigation and he was back in Fleet-street now, with the intention of dropping into the 'Herald' office presently to report himself, and, like a journalistic Oliver Twist, ask for more.

And then, as he strolled along, the dazzling vision with the red-gold hair had drifted across his path, and, on the idle impulse of the moment, he was following her, though he would have found it difficult to explain why. He was interested, he was more interested still when the girl suddenly started and swerved across the pavement away from a thick-set man with a big felt hat pulled down over his eyes. Evidently the girl was startled, and, perhaps, not a little afraid, for she would have passed on hurriedly if the somewhat forbidding-looking individual had not detained her.

"Ah, this is an unexpected pleasure," he said, in a foreign accent that was irritatingly familiar to Wendover, though he could not for the life of him recollect where he had heard it before. "You haf forgotten me, Miss--er----"

Paul could not catch the name. He was standing near enough, under the pretence of gazing into a shop window, to catch snatches of conversation. He heard the girl whisper a name under her breath, then she would have hurried on again but the man prevented her. Wendover's fingers clenched, and the blood began to sing in his ears.

"I am in a hurry," the girl said.

"So! I should not have thought so by the way you were sauntering along. But why are you angry with me, Zena? This little trouble of yours is no fault of mine. It was not I who suggested that your father, before he died, should give everything to the Brotherhood. And perhaps I can help you, even now, if you will let me. If it is a question of money----"

"You know it is," the girl whispered passionately. "You know

that I have nothing except what I can earn. You know that during my father's last illness his mind was utterly gone. Otherwise he would never have left me penniless, except for what I can earn as a dress designer."

"I am sorry," the man said. "But come this way and let us talk it over. Let us turn into a cafe and have some tea. It is not for my health to stand here, for I know not who is watching me. Come along."

The girl hesitated for a moment, and then followed her companion through the doorway of the teashop. Wendover followed in his turn, but the place was more or less crowded, so that he had to take his place at a table a little away from the others. From where he sat he could only hear a word here and there, catch a question now and again, and its muttered reply. He heard allusions to the Ambassadors' Hotel, that famous cavaranserai in Piccadilly, and something in connection with a dance that was being given there by the Associated Arts Club. Then there was a further rush of customers, and Wendover could hear no more. He waited a little time, but the two sitting at the table opposite did not seem disposed to move; then, with an impatient sigh, he told himself that he was a curious fool, and went more or less reluctantly on his way towards the offices of 'The Daily Herald.'

The Editor of the 'Herald' was in, and would be very pleased to see Mr. Wendover at once. The great man shook hands with his contributor, then closed the door of the office carefully and gave orders down the telephone that he was not to be disturbed. He took from his desk a scrap of paper.

"I was very pleased with those last articles of yours," Sutton Deane said. "They were great. But weren't you just a little reticent?"

"I had to be, my boy," Wendover explained. "As a matter of fact, I haven't finished yet. It was no very difficult matter to lay that poisonous scoundrel, John Garcia, by the heels and

see him safely shut up in Geneva. But I could only do it on a trivial charge, and, in the ordinary course of events, one of the most traitorous scoundrels in Europe will be free again in a few months, unless I can find the additional evidence that I am now looking for. That fellow is the head of a very dangerous gang; he is as false to his friends as he is to his foes, and the world will be well rid of him if I can get my proofs before he is released from prison in Geneva. That is why I am over here, more or less taking a holiday and making inquiries. You see, there's plenty of time. And if I can do what I think I can, then the 'Herald' will have the biggest scoop in the history of the paper."

"Yes, that sounds good," Sutton Deane said thoughtfully, "but are you quite sure you have laid John Garcia by the heels?"

"Of course I have. I put the police in Geneva on his track, and he was arrested a few days later. Gorzia, of the Swiss Intelligence Department, told me so, and subsequently I read that Garcia had had six months for some trivial offence--travelling without a passport or something of that sort. But why?"

"Well, look at this. It is just a scrap of paper, as you know, merely an advertisement from our 'Agony' column of last Monday. That is the original copy handed in downstairs with five shillings for its insertion. Now, you know how interested I am in criminals and their ways. If any advertisement out of the common comes in, I always ask for it to be brought up to me, so this scrap of paper came my way in the usual course. Read it."

Wendover read the scrap of paper as follows:--

"Brotherhood. Ambassadors' Hotel, Friday. Don't forget the Associated Arts Club Dance."

There was no more than that, but it touched Wendover's memory. It struck him as just a little strange that the mysterious couple he had been watching in the tea-shop had mentioned both the Ambassadors' Hotel and the

Associated Arts Club Ball. That keen journalistic nose of his began to scent out a paying mystery.

"Well?" he asked. "And what does it mean? I might tell you something about it myself, but I am not going to do so for the moment. What I am after just now is information. You didn't refuse that advertisement, I hope. Don't tell me that the 'Herald' has suddenly become squeamish. It is no doubt a signal from one set of thieves to another, but if you become particular about that kind of thing you won't get much revenue out of your agony column in the future."

"Ah, that's not quite the point," Sutton Deane said. "I don't know why, but this particular advertisement aroused my curiosity, so I told the people downstairs to hold it back, and if the man who brought it in came to complain, as he was pretty certain to do, the people behind the counter were to pretend to make enquiries and apologise, and send for me, so I could look at the chap. When he came next day, and kicked up a fuss, just as I expected, I had my chance to look at him. Of course the advertisement went in next day, but I gained my point, and had seen the man who brought it in."

"Well, I hope it was worth all the trouble."

"It was, my boy, it was," Sutton Deane said. "Now I am going to startle you. Do you remember when we were in Paris two years ago you pointed out to me in the Cafe de l'Europe a man who, you said, was the biggest scoundrel on the western continent. And you mentioned his name?"

"I remember, it was John Garcia."

"Just so. Well, the man who brought that advertisement was John Garcia. There is no mistaking the chap when once you have seen him, and you know my extraordinary memory for faces."

"But, my dear fellow, it is impossible!"

"Impossible or not, I am sure I am not mistaken. Now, don't you suppose that the police possibly might have blundered? May not they have in their their custody another fellow who

is acting the part of chief conspirator, so that the leader himself might be free to knock about Europe, when all the police are under the impression that he is safe."

Wendover was silent for a moment; for once in his life he was utterly taken by surprise. Such tidings had happened before, and they might quite reasonably happen again.

"Well," he said presently, "it may be so. On the other hand, you may have been deceived. Now, look here, suppose I take this matter up. I presume there will be no difficulty whatever in getting me a ticket for this Art Club dance?"

"You mean to go?" the editor asked, eagerly.

"Most assuredly I do," Paul said. "I want to go for more reasons than one. And, unless I am greatly mistaken, I am on the verge of the biggest adventure of my life."

II - THE GIRL IN RED

It was shortly before eleven o'clock on the evening of the Associated Arts Club ball that Paul Wendover turned into the Ambassadors' Hotel. It was a beautiful June evening, peaceful and placid, and, outwardly, at any rate, there was no sign of coming strife or trouble. In its way the Associated Arts Club dance was an important social function, though the great hotel, with its fine suites of rooms and the most competent staff in Europe, made little or nothing of it. Half-a-dozen big dances had taken place there without disturbing the thousand or so of guests who passed every night under that magnificent roof in Piccadilly.

Paul Wendover looked, in his six-feet of splendid manhood and immaculate evening dress, a typical, well-groomed Englishman, who was out for an evening of simple pleasure. He strolled through the reception rooms towards the ballroom with the air of a man who has nothing on his mind, and who is bent entirely on looking for casual acquaintances. And certainly, in the ordinary way, the Associated Arts Club dance promised to be amusing. To begin with, it was emphatically a Bohemian function of the most brilliant kind, and everybody connected with literature and the stage would probably be present. Just for a moment Wendover stood there, regarding the ebb and flow of beautifully-dressed women and well-known men, and then he thrilled and stiffened to his fingertips as his eye encountered a slim figure in scarlet--the figure of a tall, graceful girl, brilliantly fair and dazzling, her head crowned with great masses of orange-red hair, twisted like a coronet about her brows.

It was the girl that Wendover had seen in Fleet-street that afternoon. He knew that he could not possibly be mistaken.

And yet there was nothing about her now to suggest a girl who is struggling to keep her head above the social waters. She seemed to stand out from the rest of the crowd like a thing apart. It wasn't altogether that she was more outstandingly beautiful than many other exquisitely-dressed women there, but there was about her some intangible charm and distinction that seemed to lift her, in Wendover's eyes at least, far and away above the rest of them.

To begin with, it seemed to him that she looked as no Englishwoman could have done. And she was all the more attractive because the man she was with was not in the least distinguished. He was just an ordinary Englishman, sandy-haired and freckled, a man with whom, as a matter of fact, he had been at school.

But Wendover had no eyes just then for Sir Peter Cavendish; he was looking at the girl to the exclusion of everything else. She seemed to float round the room with the nameless grace and abandon of a beautiful scarlet butterfly. And, against the deep red of her dress, and the dazzling whiteness of her arms and neck, that marvellous hair of hers stood out like a dart of flame. Then, presently, the music ceased, and the girl and her partner went back to their seats. Wendover saw his acquaintance rise presently, and wander away in the direction of the smoking-room. He stopped just for a moment as Wendover accosted him.

"Who is the Lady in Scarlet?" he asked, carelessly. "Not English, I feel sure."

"Oh, no," Cavendish replied. "French, I think. Very attractive, but not quite my style. I was introduced to her by Vera Bentley, of the Frivolity, so, of course, I had to ask her for a dance. Like a good many other striking looking girls, she is dull, with little to say for herself."

Wendover elevated his eyebrows sardonically. Cavendish was by no means intellectual, and his limits were bounded by horses and golf clubs. Wendover knew he was mistaken.

He could read a fine intelligence and a beautiful intellect in that lovely face and those dark, liquid eyes. Still, it was futile to argue the matter out with a man like Cavendish.

"You surprise me," he said. "But one never can tell. By the way, what is the lady's name?"

"Zena Corroda, the daughter of the scientific johnny who made lots of money out of scientific experiments. One of those birds who are born to put the world right. Down on chaps with money, and all that. They say that the old cove was a bit of an anarchist in his way."

Wendover started slightly. He was on the track of the mystery now, for the things that Cavendish spoke of vaguely were part of a big, open book to him. He was seeing his way more or less clearly into the heart of things. He made some excuse for shaking his loquacious acquaintance off, and made his way back into the ballroom. As a matter of fact, he was more startled and uneasily interested than he was prepared to admit. For he wanted to help the girl with the red hair, the girl who stood on the threshold of a great danger. The spirit of adventure was in his blood now, but he had something to think of besides the interests of his paper.

He was going through it all now, as he stood there nodding and smiling to passing acquaintances, but with his mind far away. He was uneasy and disturbed too, as he always was till he had got hold of the right thread, and then he would plunge into the heart of the danger with a tranquil mind and an utter disregard for his own safety.

And that the girl was in some bitter trouble he felt certain. She was seated all alone now, an utter stranger in that brilliant, frivolous, dazzling crowd, a thing apart from all the rest, and almost pathetically lonely. She sat there for some time, utterly unconscious of the fact that she was being watched, and perhaps forgetful that she was there at all, and then she looked up presently, and, like a flash, the settled melancholy in her eyes changed to abject terror.

She half started from her seat, then dropped back into it again, with pallid cheeks and parted lips, and with her hand pressed to her heart, as if some mortal pain were there. It was only for a second or two, and then she recovered herself.

But, in that instant it seemed to Wendover that he had discovered the source of the trouble. He could see a tall, thin man, clean shaven and hawk-looking, making his way round the ballroom in the direction of one of the palm-lined corridors, where a series of dimly-lighted alcoves had been arranged for the use of such of the guests as wanted to sit out a dance or two. And no sooner had the man with the hawk-like face and sinister eyes vanished down the corridor than the girl rose as if impelled by some force, and followed him.

A minute later Wendover followed in his turn. He had no excuse for doing this, he told himself; it was sheer impertinent curiosity on his part, but he rose and went. It was just at the beginning of the corridor that he overtook the girl.

"Excuse me," he said, "but may I speak to you for a moment; Are you not Miss Zena Corroda?"

The girl turned a startled face upon him.

"Oh, yes," she said, "but please do not detain me. There is someone, a gentleman, who has just gone along here, that I want to speak to at once. I have a message for him which must not be delayed."

"You think he is in danger then?" Wendover asked coolly.

"Oh, yes, yes. But how do you know that? Who are you that dares to stop me in this fashion?"

"I am your friend, I think," Paul said quietly. "In fact I know I am. Don't think me presumptuous, but I am sure you are in trouble, and I want to help you. Have you ever heard your father speak of Mr. Paul Wendover?"

"The name seems familiar," the girl said. "I think there was a journalist of that name----"

"Yes, that's right," Wendover said eagerly, "I am the man. I came on behalf of my paper to interview your father in Berlin. You would probably have been a girl at school at that time. And now, Miss Corroda----"

The girl looked about her like some beautiful, hunted creature, who seeks an avenue of escape.

"Oh, please don't keep me, please," she implored. "God knows I want a friend, for I am all alone in the world, and I feel you are sincere in what you say, for you look like an English gentleman. If you have anything more to say, will you please stay here for two or three minutes, and I will come back to you. But, please let me go now."

Wendover drew back with a muttered apology. So far it seemed to him that he was gaining ground, and, at any rate, the girl had promised to return. He waited there, in the empty corridor for the best part of ten minutes, waited there quite alone, till he began to grow anxious and uneasy, and then, moved by some impulse that he made no effort to restrain, he strolled down the corridor, turning his eager gaze into the various little palm-lined alcoves, most of which were empty with the lights turned on. It was as quiet and solitary there as if it had been miles from Piccadilly, and no sound to break the silence but the distant murmur of the band.

There, at the far end of the corridor, in one of the tiny retreats, dimly lighted by a solitary lamp, it seemed to Wendover that he could see a smudge of scarlet with a suggestion of dazzling white here and there, bending over some blurred object that lay hidden behind a clump of ferns. There was something so sinister about the whole thing that Wendover rushed in and stood there, with startled eyes.

For there, behind that screen of greenery, lay the dead body of a man in evening dress. He lay there with his eyes turned upwards, lay there with a cruel gash in the centre of his dazzling expanse of shirt front, on which the crimson

stain stood out vividly. And standing over him, frozen with horror, was the girl in the red dress.

"You cannot believe it," she whispered. "You cannot believe that I--I----"

"Of course not," Wendover said. "Such a thought is impossible. But you know who the man is?"

"Yes. It's Detmar--Leo Detmar. The man I came here to warn all too late."

From the distance came the dreamy music of the band, and between those two and the dim alcove lay the body of the murdered man. Wendover was the first to recover himself.

"I must get you away from this," he whispered.