

BLACK KEY

by GERTRUDE ATHERTON

(VII continued)

Published by arrangement with Associated First National Picture, Inc. Watch for the screen with Corinne Griffith as Countess Zattiany.

"May I—am I—" he stammered. "Is anything the matter?"

For moment she had shrunk back in alarm, but the narrow street between the rambling brown stone was bright with moonlight and she recognized him. "Oh, is it you," she said with a faint smile. "I forgot my key and I cannot make any one hear the bell. The servants sleep on the top floor, and of course like dogs. Yes, you can do something. Are you willing to break a window?"

"Watch me!" Clavering forgot that he was satirizing and remote and turning thirty-four. He took the area steps at a bound. From gates guarded the basement doors, but the old bars on the windows were easily wrenched out. He lifted his foot, kicked out a pane, and ran up the narrow dark stairs. There was a light in the spacious hall and in another moment he had opened the door. He expected to be dismissed with a word of sorry thanks, but she said in a tone of casual hospitality:

"There are sandwiches in the library and I can give you a white key and soda."

She walked with a light step down the hall, the narrow tail of her black velvet gown wringing after her. Clavering followed in a daze, but his trained eye took note of the fine old rugs and carved Italian furniture, two splendid tapestries, and great vases of flowers that filled the air with a drowsy perfume. He had heard of the Ogden house, built and furnished fifty years ago. The couple that had leased it had been childless and it showed little wear. The chairs curving on the left had evidently been recarpeted, but in a very dull red that harmonized with the mellow tints of the old house.

She opened a door at the end of the hall on the right and he found himself in a large library whose walls were covered with books to the ceiling. Dinwiddie had told him that the Ogdens were bookish people and that "Mary's" grandfather had been an eminent jurist. The room was as dark in tone as the hall, but the worn chairs and sofas looked very comfortable. A log was burning on the hearth.

She took a key from a drawer and handed it to him.

"You will find whiskey and a syphon in that cabinet, Mr. Clavering. I keep them for Judge Trent."

"Mr. Clavering. He came out of his daze. "You know who I am then?"

"But certainly. I am not as reckless as all that."

Her accent was slight but indubious, yet impossible to place. It might be that of a European who spoke many languages, or of an American with a susceptible ear who had lived the greater part of her life abroad. "I was driving one day with Judge Trent and saw you walking with Mr. Dinwiddie."

"Trent—ah!"

He had his first full look into those wise unfathomable eyes. Standing close to her, she seemed somewhat older than he had guessed her to be, although her face was unlined. Probably it was her remarkable poise, her air of power and security—and those eyes! What had they not looked upon? She smiled and pointed to a thermos bottle.

"You are forgetting your whiskey and soda," she reminded him. He filled his glass, took a sandwich, and sank into the depths of a leather chair. She had seated herself on an upright throne-like chair opposite. Her black velvet gown was like a vase supporting a

sublimely moulded tower of dazzling fairness. She wore the three rows of pearls that had excited almost as much speculation as her mysterious self. As she drank her mild beverage she looked at him over the brim of her cup and once more appeared to be on the verge of laughter.

"Will you tell me who you are?" asked Clavering bluntly. "This is hardly fair, you know."

"Mr. Dinwiddie really managed to coax nothing from Judge Trent? He called three times, I understand."

"Not a word."

"He had my orders," she said coolly. "I am obliged to pass some time in New York and I have my reasons for remaining obscure."

"Then you should have avoided first nights."

"But I understood that Society did not attend first nights. So Judge Trent informed me. I love the play. Judge Trent told me that first nights were very amusing and that I would be sure to be seen by no one I had ever met in European Society."

"Probably not," he said drily, and feeling decidedly nettled at her calm assumption that nothing but the society of fashion counted. "But the people who do attend them are a long sight more distinguished in a daze, but his trained eye took note of the fine old rugs and carved Italian furniture, two splendid tapestries, and great vases of flowers that filled the air with a drowsy perfume. He had heard of the Ogden house, built and furnished fifty years ago. The couple that had leased it had been childless and it showed little wear. The chairs curving on the left had evidently been recarpeted, but in a very dull red that harmonized with the mellow tints of the old house.



"For a moment she had shrunk back in alarm."

"Oh, I noticed that," she said quickly. "Charming intelligent faces, a great variety of types, and many—but many—quite amazing. But who are they, may I ask? I thought there was nothing but—well, the bourgeoisie."

He informed her.

"Ah! You see—well, I always heard that your people of the artistic and intellectual class were rather eccentric—rather cultivated a pose."

"Once, maybe. They all make too much money these days. But there are freaks. If you care to look for them. Some of the suddenly prosperous authors and dramatists have rather dizzo looking wives; and I suppose—well, the poor but—well, the bourgeoisie."

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attorney. As my husband was killed in the first year of the war and I had no other ties, I can assure you I was glad to come. She shivered slightly. "Oh yes, Vienna! To see so much misery and to be able to give so little help! But now that Mary's and my own fortune are restored I can assure you it is the greatest satisfaction of my life to send a large share of our incomes to our agents in Vienna."

This time there was an unmistakable ring of truth in her deep tones. And she was human. Clavering had begun to doubt it, notwithstanding her powerful disturbing magnetism. But was the falling in love with her. He was attracted, but slowly until he reached the lamp-post opposite her house; finally grinning, he folded his arms and leaned against it. There he stood until a policeman came along some two hours later. He stated the case to the officer that if anything happened to the house he would hold him responsible. The man was inclined to be intensely suspicious until Clavering mentioned his newspaper and followed the threat with a bill. Then he promised to watch the house like a hawk, and Clavering, tired, stiff and very cold, went home to bed.



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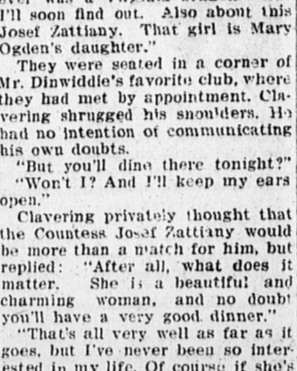
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"I'll come as often as you will let me. Make no mistake about that. I should not have stayed so long. It is very late, and you are well, rather unprepared, you know. I think you should have a chaperon."

"I certainly shall not. And if I find you interesting enough to talk

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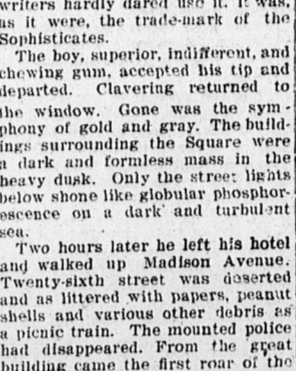
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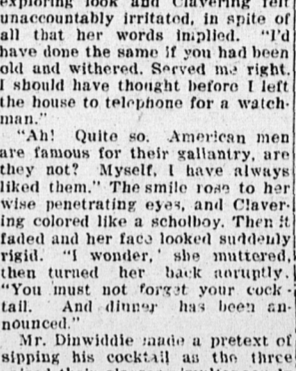
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London long before the war, but myself, I never liked it. Judge Trent sat opposite his hostess at the round table. She had placed Mr. Dinwiddie and Mr. Osborne on either side of her, smiling at Clavering. "I am sorry I do not know any young ladies," she said graciously, although there was a twinkle in her eye. "You look rather homesome."

"Why should he?" growled Dinwiddie. "He is young and you are young. The rest of us are the ones to feel out of it."

"Not a bit of it! Not a bit of it!" exclaimed Judge Trent. "You forget that Madame Zattiany has lived in Europe since infancy. She's talked to elderly statesmen all her life."

"Well, we're not statesmen, the Lord knows," Dinwiddie could not but have relied on to make the obvious retort, thought Clavering, although it must be admitted that he was seldom with none at all. "But you must have seen more young women than old during the war, Madame Zattiany. I understand that Mary turned her palace in Buda Pesth into a hospital and that you were her chief assistant."

"That is quite true, and I had by no means confined myself before that to elderly statesmen; but I had almost forgotten what a young man war finished. Or Society, for that matter. My one temptation to enter Society here would be the hope of forming a relief organization—drive you call it?—for the starving children of Austria. Russian children are not the only pitiable objects in Europe, and after all, the children of civilized countries are of more value to the future of the world."

(To be continued.)