

# SWEETHEARTS AND WIVES

## HOW LESTER WILLIS LEARNED WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A WOMAN

By BEATRICE SHAW



*"I can only say to you, Mr. Willis,  
that I hope fate will some day  
teach you what it means  
to be a woman."*

WILLIS stretched himself with a long, lazy cat-like movement of pure physical enjoyment; the action sent the blood bounding through his veins, and brought a glorious message of perfect health and strength from the muscles rippling under the skin.

He decided to spend the evening in his own rooms and went to his bedroom to change his dinner jacket coat for a smoking. Returning he met his man, doubt and uncertainty radiating from the smug countenance.

"A lady has called to see you, sir."

"A lady—now—who is she—what does she want?"

"I dunno, sir."

"What is her name?"

"She won't say sir, nor her business neither. Says she must see you."

"Is she young, old—?"

"Young, sir, and seemingly not too bad to look at, though her veil—"

"Show her up."

The curt interruption sent the man away without demur. Willis closed the door which shut off his bedroom from his sitting-room, dropped the curtain over it and waited. She entered quickly. They were alone. Dorothy flung back the heavy veil which shielded her face and faced him silently.

"Dorothy, you here—at this hour—alone—are you mad?"

His eyes rested on her coldly, pitilessly; anger plain on his knitted brows, in the set of his lips. She took a step forward.

"Lester—I had to come. Your letter. I don't understand."

His gaze continued cold, inexorable.

"The meaning was plain, I think—it must end."

She quivered as a thoroughbred horse quivers under the curb.

"End—why—why must it end? What harm does it do you to be friends with me—for me to love—like—"

He flung himself impatiently into the nearest chair. Dorothy remained standing, disregarding his indication to take the opposite one.

Under his critical gaze she shrank, and a flush crept slowly, painfully across the pinched features. She became suddenly conscious of her shabby skirt, of its dripping hem, of her shoes sodden with water, leaving wet patches on the soft green pile carpet.

He saw her embarrassment and his mood relaxed.

"See here, Dorothy." The words came rapidly as a man speaks who wishes to end a difficult task as quickly as possible. "I wrote to you because I thought it best, because I wished to avoid a scene—"

"There will be no scene." The interruption was quick, the tone steady, the violet eyes were dry and unblinking. "I only wanted to hear exactly what you meant from your own lips. I could think of no other way to do it, so I came up here—straight from my work—it seemed to me best. I am sorry if it annoys you, but—"

He waved her apologies aside.

"Perhaps it would have been best if you had left it as I wished, but it is too late now. I meant just this—just what I said to you before. It must end. It has been very pleasant, but it must end. It is better that you and I should not meet except casually when occasion arises."

She flinched and bit her lip till the blood ran red on her teeth.

"If I don't mind, why need you?"

"I do mind."

She shrugged her shoulders and was silent.

Exasperated he spoke warmly.

"You are young—too young to know what it may lead to—in the eyes of the world, at any rate, even though we may know there is no more than friendship in it. You are a mere child. I must not let it go on. You will meet another man later, who will marry you and forget me—"

"There will be no other man—"

The words came steadily quietly, "It is not easy to forget—you, Lester."

He leaned forward, speaking earnestly.

"I want you to forget—I ask you to forget. Dorothy, believe me, dear, I am too fond of you—really I am—to let you go on drifting into a fool's paradise, risking your good name when I know that love could at best be but transitory with me. So it must come to an end. I wish it—later you will see the wisdom of it."

She turned to the door smiling a faraway, curious little smile—the all-wise smile of a woman who knows infinitely more than the man who tries to teach her.

He followed her out to the elevator.

"Dorothy—don't go like that!—say one word to me first. Say you forgive me for any pain I have caused you, and believe that I only mean to be kind. Have you nothing

you can say before you go?" for her eyes were unresponsive, his hand held her uplifted veil.

"I can only say this to you—Mr. Willis—that I hope some day Fate will teach you what it means to be a woman."

His hand fell from hers. A gust of wind shook the windows, the rain rushed against the glass. Involuntarily she shivered.

"It's a beast of a night." The topic came as a relief in the strained silence. "You will not mind my not seeing you home—a taxi is the quickest, I think—take a cab—"

He pushed some coins into her small, damply gloved hand—the fingers closed over them, but she did not reply. The elevator reached the floor, the iron gates opened, and the attendant stepped aside and waited for her to enter.

As he returned to the armchair before the fire, Willis felt somewhat as a man might feel who in a fit of insensate rage has killed the dog that loves him best. Dorothy's great reproachful eyes had the dumbly pathetic pleading of a whipped spaniel, and the pleading haunted him in spite of his self-righteous reiteration, "It is best!—it is far the best," as he punctured the blazing fire till the flames roared up the chimney.

And yet she was very sweet—he remembered the little things about her that had first attracted, afterward held his fastidious taste. He recalled her delicate face, the big mysterious eyes, the sensitive mouth with the faint quivering smile hovering around the lips, and her presence seemed to fill the room, he was permeated with the scent of her hair with the sweetness of her voice.

"Dorothy—Dorothy—Dorothy." Gradually he slipped into the embrace she held out to him—the room widened, darkened. He was alone with her in a vast expanse of moon and stars. Together they flew upward, higher—higher and always she was a little above him—he was straining to reach her, to clasp her, but she evaded him. The little mocking smile was on her lips—her voice like a far away whisper reached his ear.

"Fate will some day teach you what it is to be a woman."

Suddenly she released him—he felt her grasp relax—then he was falling rapidly into space, plunging downward, earthward through the darkness. His feet struck something hard, the whirling sensation stopped. He was standing on the pavement, the roar of the City around him, beside him jostling pedestrians, and in the streets the traffic of a great town homeward bound.

Willis did not quite know why he was standing on that particular spot, but he felt sure that he was waiting for something—he was also sure that the something that he was waiting for would come before long, and that nothing but patience would hasten it.

It was raining too—a steady, soaking rain. Willis knew that he was wet; that he had been wet for some time. His feet squelched dismally every time he moved them, yet he was conscious of neither annoyance nor irritation—he who usually loathed a mud speck, cavilled at a raindrop. He knew that he was wretchedly uncomfortable, but at the same time it seemed to have come to him that it was his lot in life to be uncomfortable, so he merely held the fragile umbrella rigidly over his head and waited.

He became conscious of a burning sensation in the palm of his right hand. Curious he opened it. On the shabby grey suede of his glove, lay two bright half-crowns, and as he gazed at them a voice from far away murmured in his ear. "It's a beast of a night—I can't see you home—take a cab—take a cab—take a cab."

He tried to throw the coins away, but they stuck to his hand and refused to be dislodged. He took a step forward to drop them in the gutter, only to find his progress impeded by something clammy and wet which flapped around his dripping ankles, and twisted itself round his legs. Glancing down he saw that he was incased in a narrow blue serge skirt, the edge of which was heavy with moisture and caked with mud.

He drew back with a jerk of annoyance, and at the movement a thing that appeared to have been poised on his head slipped suddenly over one eye. He surmised that it was a hat, and endeavored as best he could with the hand that held the half crowns to readjust it, but it lunged first one side then the other, and finally half way down his back. At length with weary resignation he closed the umbrella and hoisted the unwieldy appendage into its original place, prodding it through and through with various pins which his fingers drew as if from long usage from among its trimmings.

The hat restored, Willis discovered that it was necessary to keep his head at one precise angle, his neck a rigid column, in order to maintain its equilibrium, and with the resignation which obsessed him he fell in with its caprices. Cabs passed him in dozens, taxi's, hansoms, four-

wheelers, the coins still burned into his hands, but Willis remained patiently on the pavement waiting for he knew not what.

Had he been himself, he would have flung depression to the winds and gone home in a cab to a good dinner. He knew that he would have done this—but being, as he understood, for the

moment, Dorothy, he was unable to carry out this programme. He knew that in a small purse lying in the bottom of his coat pocket there was only enough money to carry him through the week which he considered sufficient recompense for the expenditure of Dorothy's youth and health and temper—therefore cabs were not, in the ordinary regime of Dorothy, things to be considered for a moment. If it rained one got wet; if it was fine, one did not. That was all there was about it. True, there were the half-crowns. And the Willis who was Dorothy and the Dorothy who was Willis mentally asked each other what he or she should do under the circumstances. Willis felt Dorothy's impulse to throw them in the gutter, to give them away to the match seller at the next corner. He felt her hatred of the man who could take away her happiness and offer her five shillings to pay for a cab as a substitute. But the Willis in Dorothy brought prudence to the rescue and insinuated that the impulse had been kindly if the act had been crude. He was sorry for her. He wished her to be comfortable. He would like to think of her going home in a cab even if she went home unhappy.

A taxi with the flag raised slid along beside the curb. Automatically Willis beckoned. The cab drew up beside him. He shut the umbrella.

Stumbling over the skirt, he recollected that he was no longer Willis, but Dorothy. It was Dorothy who set the unruly hat straight, who pulled down the disordered skirt, and re-arranged the twists of damp lace round her neck.

It was warm and pleasant inside the cab—Willis sank back against the cushions, only to spring into an erect position again as the brim of his hat flopped over his eyes.

Willis had always kept up a pleasant little fiction that he considered a pretty woman the most enviable person on the world, but as the cab swept on its way he began to doubt the wisdom of his remark—later he began to doubt the wisdom of the speed at which they were travelling. He grew alarmed as the whirring of the machinery increased—it seemed that the wheels positively sang in their rapid revolution. Willis let down the window to shout to the driver. A blast of cold, wet air tore the hat from his head, and his voice was lost in the howl of the wind. Faster—faster they flew till the lighted shops were mere specks and the houses became an indistinguishable blur.

A crash—a final whirr—a sound like a pistol shot—or the snapping of a Kodak shutter.

Willis was standing in a brilliantly lighted bedroom—the cab, the streets, the hat, the rain, the wet shoes all were gone.

A delicate odour of multitudinous perfumes crept up to his nostrils from the dressing-table before which he stood, a table whereon were littered tortoise shell and gold brushes, open powder boxes, fanciful cosmetic receptacles.

The long narrow mirror reflected an image at first strange to him, a moment after he recollected it as the form of the identical woman to whom he had last made his favourite remark about the enviability of pretty women. He remembered also the faintly sarcastic smile with which she had received it, and the scepticism in her voice as she replied:—

"Ah, Mr. Willis, if only you could know for one hour all that women endure every day of their lives, you would never say that again."

It was an attractive picture that greeted his eyes—a petite figure exquisitely moulded, exquisitely gowned. Golden hair piled high in intricate coils and puffs and curls on the daintily set head, bare white arms with dimples at the elbows, a firm, ivory neck, whereon sparkled and flashed a magnificent diamond necklace.

Yet Willis was not pleased, neither was he any more comfortable than he had been in Dorothy's blue serge skirt and dripping shoes. A stiffness, a sensation of being rigidly encased from knees to neck in the tightest and most unyielding of armour oppressed him. He dared not move his head lest a curl should become dislodged, and to add to his discomfort his face itself felt as if coated with cement. Finally his silken clad feet were thrust into high-heeled, glittering shoes as rigid and unyielding in their compression as the garment which encased his body.

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