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Woman Against Woman

or A Terrible Accusation.

CHAPTER X.—(Continued).

She did not understand her own emotions, but she felt safer alone with the woman upon the bed. She threw herself upon a couch, the room dimly lighted, and tried to go to sleep, knowing herself to be so light a sleeper that any movement whatever upon the bed would awaken her.

But she could not sleep. The events of the evening had been too much for her. Her sympathy was too much aroused for that household. She had taken off her lovely gown and put on a pretty, loose wrapper of flowing white, which Dunraven had given her during those few happy days, and lay there with one white arm above her head, her eyes closed. Every door was locked, and yet as she lay there, suddenly she seemed to feel a presence approaching her.

Believing that Ethel had slipped noiselessly from the bed and was stealing toward the place where she had the drug in concealment, she decided to watch her. Opening her eyes just the faintest particle, so that the lashes fully concealed the opening, she looked up. To her intense astonishment she saw that Muriel had entered the room.

She could scarcely conceal her start of amazement, but by a mighty effort she controlled herself and lay there motionless, fully simulating sleep, yet never losing a motion of the gliding figure.

Coming to the side of the couch, without even the faintest noise—for Ailsa's senses were all alert—she touched the girl gently upon the eyes. The ends of the cold fingers sent a thrill of horror through her, but not by the quiver of a muscle did Ailsa betray her knowledge of that presence.

What was she doing? What did it all mean?

Curiosity, horror, dismay were all blended, yet she held herself to her intention, when the fingers were lifted as gently as they had been placed there. But it was a terrible ordeal.

And then began a curious movement, which at first Ailsa did not in the least understand—a curious movement of the hands across the face, very gentle, very soothing, very—

And then Ailsa realized with awful horror that a sleepy sensation was stealing over her, a sensation which she could not at first control. She seemed like a bit of wax in the hands of the girl bending over her, yet all her will-power, not submerged in that other, was fighting with the strength of a wild despair.

Even half controlled as she was, Ailsa had comprehended the awful truth at last—Muriel Ogden was hypnotizing her.

But the very realization counteracted the influence, and once again, with senses fully restored now, she was watching the girl watching her with an intensity that was breathless.

At last Muriel spoke, her voice low, gentle, thrilling under its tone of quiet command.

"Ailsa—do you hear me?"

And imitating the tone as nearly as was possible, Ailsa answered:

"Yes."

And then came the next question, more potent, more filled with terror for the quivering subject.

"Ailsa—will you—obey me?"

And the answer followed in the same monotone that had been used before:

"I will—obey."

"Rise."

With only a momentary hesitation the girl rose, slowly, mechanically, her movements stiff, almost ungraceful, and stood with head erect.

"Open your eyes," came the command again.

They opened with a curious snap, and stared vacantly straight into her own.

It required all Ailsa's strength to stand that test, but she was glad of the opportunity it offered her to see Muriel's face, glad in one moment and dreading it in the next, for the terror almost overcame her. The shadowy form in the dim light was like some awful ghost, straight, upright, with those awful burning eyes fixed upon her own that seemed to glow with a scorching fire, and yet Ailsa stood there like a stone.

"Will you answer the questions which I wish to have answered?" came the query, low, gentle, ghastly.

"I will—answer."

"Why did you come here?"

"I had no other place to go."

"Does—Leslie Dunraven love you?"

For a moment Ailsa hesitated. She suddenly remembered the scene in the dancing-hall, the scene at the end of the room which Muriel had witnessed. She felt that if she spoke falsely about that, all that she hoped to gain would be eternally lost, and so answered with a little moan, not affected at all:

"Yes—he loves me."

She saw Muriel catch her breath, saw her grow a shade whiter even in that shadowy light, saw her eyes glow more brilliantly. There was not a doubt in Muriel's mind but that Ailsa was absolutely under her control after that.

"Will you obey me always, whenever I speak to you?" she asked, after a little hesitation.

"I will obey you," came the answer, in monotonous horror.

"That is all. Lie down."

Ailsa obeyed.

"Close your eyes."

When they were apparently closed, once more the silent passes were made across the brow, once more the voice came quiet, commanding:

"Sleep!"

Ailsa sighed.

One moment of close scrutiny, then Muriel turned silently away and vanished.

Ailsa did not hear her go out, but she felt the absence and rising swiftly to her feet, she started frantically for the door. Before she had reached it she fell forward in a deadly swoon, her head striking against the door through which the apparition had vanished.

CHAPTER XI.

It was fully daylight before Ailsa awoke from that long swoon, the winter sun beaming through the window and shedding his warm rays straight across her face.

She lifted herself with difficulty, and managed to sit up.

At first it seemed to her that she was back with her father in the little, foul, bare room. She even heard the tones of his brutal voice, and felt the touch of his heavy fist upon her breast.

She lifted her hand to her aching head and pressed it there, then looked about her in half-dazed wonder. That creamy lace and those hangings of rich brocade surely did not belong in a tenement; that great tiger-skin rung before the fireplace did not belong to the daughter of Dowd Valworth.

Then, with a sudden sigh, she remembered, and started so violently that she barely repressed a scream.

It had all come back to her—that midnight visit, the unholy gleam of those great dark eyes, the uncanny touch of those chill fingers, the words spoken by those pallid lips. But it was all pale now—pale in memory, like the recurrence to us of some unfinished dream. Was it true? Had Muriel really been there? or had she merely dreamed?

Her head ached so that she could not think clearly; yet she thought it must be a dream. Her remembrance of everything, while sending a thrill of horror to her very soul, was vague and shadowy.

She half decided that it was a dream, and was about to smile at her own folly, when it occurred to her to wonder why she was upon the floor. She knew that she had lain upon the couch when the others had left her. She remembered that she had tried to sleep. Had she, in her violent nightmare, arisen and fallen upon the floor?

She arose blindly and groped her way to the door, the pain in her head staggering her. The door was locked. She tried the one leading to her own room. It, too, was locked. As well as she remembered anything, she recalled the fact that it was through the hall door the vision had vanished; yet it was both locked and bolted upon the inside.

She stood there appalled, absolutely forgetting the existence of Ethel Dunraven, until a low moan from the bed recalled her.

Holding her throbbing temples with both hands, she staggered over to the bed. Ethel was lying there upon her back, her lips swollen and distorted, her beautiful blue eyes dulled and haggard, her hair disheveled, looking as little like anything human as one in that shape could possibly appear.

Ailsa shivered.

"My goodness!" she gasped; "what a terrible household! In spite of the beatings, the cursing, the starvation, the old life was less harrowing than this. I will go back! I can not bear the mental torture of it all!"

But already Ethel Dunraven was sitting up, pushing the tangled hair back from her eyes, and staring wildly about her. She glanced up at Ailsa, and then threw a quick, searching look about the room. With a shiver she drew herself closer to Ailsa, and in a low, hoarse tone, in which there was not a trace of the old musical voice, she half whispered:

"Where—where is she?"

Ailsa started. In spite of the awful pain in her head, she knelt down and took both of the small burning hands in her own—hands that were trembling violently.

"You mean—Muriel?" she asked, her own voice low as Ethel's own.

The young wife nodded.

"She is—in her own room, I suppose," Ailsa whispered. "Why?"

"Are you sure—sure?" gasped Ethel. "Look about you—quick! Isn't she behind the drapery or the dressing-case? Look—quick!"

"She is not here, I tell you," answered Ailsa. "The doors are all locked; she could not get in."

"Bah! what difference does a locked door make to her? Ailsa, I—Oh, what is the matter with me? Is it—is it the old—old curse? Ailsa, tell me, have I—taken—it again?"

She looked with such bitter pleading into the girl's eyes that Ailsa forgot her abhorrence, and taking the little form in her arms, drew it closely to her breast.

"Yes. You have almost broken your husband's heart; but you will not do it again, will you?" she said, soothingly. "You will not—"

But, to her surprise, Ethel Dunraven pushed her away, and, with the energy of despair, sat up in bed.

"Hush!" she gasped. "You don't understand. How should you, when none of them will believe me! They think it is a delusion produced by a morphine-crazed brain, but I swear to you that it is not! Somehow I have felt from the first that you would believe in me, that you would help me. I had intended to trust you, but I waited until it was too late. I am not mad! I swear to you that I am as sane as you are, except for the hideous pain in my head. It always leaves me the pain. Oh, I hate it, I tell you! I hate it! I have sworn and sworn that not another particle of it should ever enter my body, but—I have no more power over it than you would have. She—she will not—let me stop!"

A little cry escaped Ailsa, but already Ethel Dunraven's hand was pressed over her lips, a wild whisper brought back the staggering senses.

"Hush! She will hear you! There is scarcely a whisper that she does not hear. She will be here in a moment. When she is alone with me, she will point to where she has the hateful drug concealed, and I will go to it without a murmur. I will take it and— Who could loathe me as I loathe myself!" When they are here, she fixes her eyes upon me, and I beg and plead for it, conscious of what I am doing, yet as powerless to prevent it as you are to take in air when you breathe. In half an hour from now I shall be raving and pleading. I shall—"

"Hush! hush!" gasped Ailsa. You shall not! I will not allow her to come! No one shall enter here except myself. I promise you—"

They had been looking into each other's eyes, holding each other as if for protection against some demoniac influence; but with a start both looked up, and saw leaning against the foot of the bed, a placid smile hovering upon her rigid lips, no other than—Muriel.

There was the same deadly gleam in her eyes that Ailsa remembered to have seen in the night, the same peculiar pallor about the face, the same deep shadows beneath the eyes.

Ethel's muscles seemed suddenly to relax. She dropped back from Ailsa's arms and lay panting upon the pillow, looking with mute horror straight into the eyes of her sister.

For a moment it seemed to Ailsa that the strain upon her mentality would snap the cord that holds reason in thrall. She could hear the beating of her own heart like the rumble of thunder in her ears. Had she been in the presence of a spirit from the other world, there would have seemed to her less of the uncanny in the visitation.

A wild scream from Ethel broke the spell that bound her, and perhaps saved her reason.

She sprung toward Muriel, intending to seize her, to denounce her to that trusting household, but as she reached the girl's side, her hands dropped to her side.

Muriel had simply turned her eyes upon her, never moving her long, lithe body, never allowing the smile to fade from her white lips, and to have saved her life Ailsa could not have touched her.

Ethel was still screaming, and while they stood thus, Dunraven and Ogden both entered.

A scene followed which rivaled the one of the night before in frenzy, piteous pleadings, wildest ravings, blood-curdling screams. Oh, it was horrible—horrible!

And through it all Ailsa sat upon a couch where she had fallen, silent, cold, apparently unable to speak, holding her hands between her knees helplessly, and listening to the wild beatings of the blood in her own veins.

The sensation was one which she could never afterward recall. It seemed to her that she must have been dead for those moments, for she remembered nothing of it all—nothing whatever.

When she came to herself, she was in her own little sitting-room, with Lloyd Ogden chafing her hands.

"It was foolish of us to allow you to remain in there alone with her," he was saying. "We ought to have known how it would be. You are all unstrung. Won't you drink this coffee? I can't imagine why Leslie ever allowed a sensitive girl like you to come into a house like this. Drink this coffee, won't you?"

He held it to her lips, and she gulped it down in great long draughts. The stimulant was exactly what she needed, and she sat upright a moment after she had swallowed it, pushing her hair back almost as helplessly as Ethel had done an hour before.

"There! You are better now!" exclaimed Lloyd Ogden gently. "You can never endure this, little Ailsa, and Leslie should not have asked it of you. I so hoped it might prove different, that you could be a friend to my poor little sister, but we can not accept the sacrifice of you. It is too great."

But, to his surprise, she leaned toward him and placed her hand heavily upon his arm.

"There is no power strong enough to make me leave this household now—so long, at least, as you and Mr. Dunraven will allow me to remain. Oh, Mr. Ogden, I wish I dared tell you something! I wish I dared name to you the terrible influence that is at work in your sister's life."

He smiled gently, but so sadly.

"You must not believe that, Ailsa," he said, softly. "I know what she has been telling you. It is the one thing that makes us know that the drug has unsettled her poor little brain. There was never a sister more thoughtful, more self-sacrificing, more noble than Muriel. She would tell the blood from her heart, drop by drop, for Ethel. She has already sacrificed what few women would for her. She has given up a marriage of great wealth and social prestige with a man whom she loved. It would be absolutely impious, almost sacrilegious, to credit the absurd suggestions of Ethel in this instance, Ailsa. There is nothing under Heaven that could ever make either Leslie or me believe that; and surely we know her after all these years of sacrifice and torture."

And then it was that Ailsa realized the dimensions of the task before her. If she was to save the reason, the life of that unhappy wife, she must work alone, work secretly.

But what was she to do, and how?

CHAPTER XII.

For very nearly a week those scenes continued, increasing in horror, if that were possible, instead of decreasing.

Vainly Ailsa strove in some way to discover a means of stopping Muriel's entrance to that room; but bolts and bars seemed to be no more formidable a detriment to her than they once were to Mephistopheles himself.

When Ailsa thought herself most secure against the woman she feared and hated, that moment the fiend stood before her, smiling in that cold, placid way which Ailsa had come to loathe and fear.

And then, after that time, slowly but surely, she began to feel the hideous influence of the woman stealing over her. Once or twice she had submitted herself to the same ordeal that she had undergone that night in Ethel's room; but she found that she was playing with a scorching fire, when one day she looked into Muriel's eyes, as she was bidden to approach her and found herself mechanically obeying, not because she wished to deceive the woman she was striving to outwit, but because that awful presence compelled her.

Then she turned and fled—fled from the destruction which she felt was upon her, yet knew herself powerless to combat.

She had by no means destroyed Muriel's belief in her own absolute power, however; for, as Ailsa fled down the hall, she heard the sound of low, mocking laughter that maddened her.

During those days of torture Ailsa had not once seen Leslie Dunraven alone; but, looking into the strained, haggard eyes of his wife, she realised that something must be done, or the unhappy creature would die there under the mystic influence which she had found no power to stay.

Ethel was lying there upon the bed, the pupils of her eyes dilated until they appeared black instead of blue, great circles about her mouth and eyes, a pinched, clamped appearance about her nostrils that spoke of death; and, in sheer despair, Ailsa determined that she would make Dunraven see the danger, that she would compel him to help her, and so prevent murder being done in his own house, to his own wife.

She entered his room noiselessly, determining that she would keep her presence there a secret, if that were possible.

His dressing-room opened off Ethel's boudoir; and, passing through both, she was about to enter his sitting-room beyond, when the noise of voices in the room attracted her. She drew the portiere a trifle aside and glanced in.

She caught her breath with a sudden gasp and drew back, wrapping the portiere about her so that she could see without being seen.

It never occurred to her that what she was doing was dishonorable. In a household like that, anything was allowable. And even if she had believed it a crime she was committing, it is doubtful that she would not have stood there just the same, rooted to the spot with surprise.

Leslie Dunraven was seated before the glowing fire in dressing-gown and slippers, his head thrown back, looking up into the eyes of his wife's sister, who stood slightly behind him. Her hand played with the short thick curls of clustering hair that adorned his shapely head; her eyes were filled with an expression which Ailsa had never seen in them before, a soft, tender light, the light in the eyes of a tigress resting upon her little cub.

(To be continued.)

CAUSES LOSS OF THE SENSES.

Soldiers Become Blind from "Wounds to Consciousness."

That blindness can be caused by concussion is one of the many medical surprises of the war.

A man, says a writer in the Lancet, after more or less prolonged fatigue, induced by marching and exposure in the trenches, is incapacitated by the explosion of a shell in his immediate vicinity. He may be merely knocked down or thrown into the air and more or less seriously injured or wounded by concussion, shrapnel bullets or shell splinters. Consciousness is lost for a variable time, but often not so far as to prevent automatic movements, so that the man may walk in a dazed condition to a dressing station.

At this stage, it would appear, the mental balance is very much disturbed, nor does memory retain any record of the phase. But the man is "instantaneously struck blind," and this may be associated with deafness, loss of smell and taste. The eyes are found to be watering freely and the lids tend to keep tight shut. After the lapse of a week or two they become less tender, and then on examination it is found, very often, that the eyes are quite normal.

By this time, too, some sight has been recovered, and light can be distinguished from darkness. The patient gropes about, but curiously enough, does not seem to stumble up against objects in his path; yet it is found that his field of vision is restricted, "indeed, to a degree which seems scarcely consistent with the avoidance of obstacles in walking." Eventually complete, though slow, recovery takes place.

It appears curious to the oculist who contributes this record that the eye to recover last is frequently the "shooting eye," and that some of the patients candidly admit to being in a "blue funk"; also that in all there has been a complete mental upset. He dismisses, however, as a cruel injustice the suggestion that shamming may be an explanation. These cases, he says, are to be regarded as "examples of injuries or wounds to consciousness." The problem is psychological and clearly demands a most careful and minute study of the evolution of character.

It would seem that as the result of severe and sudden shock the conscious mind, with its high attributes of control and determination, is thrown out of action; the "subconscious mind" supervenes. This subconscious mind, about which so much has been written of late, is a kind of storehouse of forgotten and unremembered things—events and ideas which belong to the past of the race as well as to that of the individual, but of the presence of which within him the individual is scarcely conscious, or not at all, conscious, as the case may be. The highest centres in his brain cease to functionate. Powerful primeval instincts resume sway and a "block" occurs between the mechanism and the perception of sight which is in some respects comparable to the block which is often noticed when reading an uninteresting book, and by reason of which nothing is conveyed to the mind though the words are seen quite clearly.

"It is pointed out that these "wounds to consciousness" are not confined to one particular sense; it may be urged—and that is the general application of this most interesting contribution—that rash and cruel judgments in which occur the terms "nervous wreck" and and "neurotic," not to speak of more unpleasant taunts, shall be avoided at all costs. The effects of modern shell fire are still not completely understood; that they are profound from a psychological as as well as from a physical point of view scarcely admits of denial.

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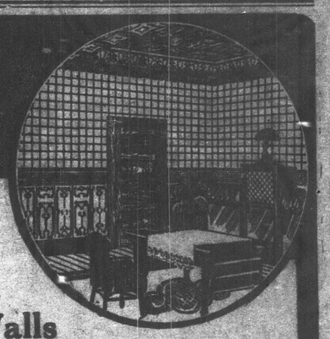

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