

The WOMAN

A Novel by Albert Payson Terhune

Founded on William C. de Mille's Play of the same name

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I - Congressman Standish and the Woman, believing themselves in love, spend a trial week as man and wife in a hotel in northern New York under assumed names. The woman awakens to the fact that she does not love Standish and calls their engagement off. Standish protests undying devotion.

CHAPTER II - Wanda Kelly, telephone girl at the Hotel Keswick, Washington, is loved by Tom Blake, son of the political boss of the house. He proposes marriage and is refused.

CHAPTER III - She gives as one of the reasons her determination to get revenge on Jim Blake for ruining her father, Congressman Frank E. Kelly. Congressman Standish, turned insurgent, is fighting the Mullins bill, a measure in the interests of the railroads. The machine is seeking means to discredit Standish in the hope of pushing the bill through.

CHAPTER IV - Robertson, son-in-law of Jim Blake and the latter's candidate for speaker of the house, tries to win Standish over, and failing, threatens to dig into his past.

CHAPTER V - Jim Blake finds out about the episode of five years back at the northern New York hotel. He secures all the facts except the name of the woman and proposes to use the story as a club to force Standish to allow the Mullins bill to pass.

CHAPTER VI - Tom Blake and his father have a family row over the father's political theories. Jim Blake sends for Standish.

CHAPTER VII - He lays a trap to secure the name of the woman. He tells Miss Kelly that he is going to have a talk with Standish and that at its conclusion the latter will call up a number on the telephone to warn the woman. He offers Miss Kelly \$100 for that number.

CHAPTER VIII - At the conclusion of the interview with Blake Standish gets a New York wire and calls Plaza 1001. A few minutes later Robertson tells Miss Kelly to call Plaza 1001 and get his wife or one of the servants on the phone.

CHAPTER IX - Miss Kelly refuses to give Jim Blake the number called by Standish.

CHAPTER X - Blake has a story of the Standish episode prepared ready to send out as soon as the woman's name is learned. Tom Blake tells his father of his love for Wanda Kelly and a family row ensues. Blake's daughter, Grace, arrives with her husband, Governor Robertson.

CHAPTER XI - Blake sends for Standish and Grace promises to entertain him until her father's return.

CHAPTER XII - Miss Kelly calls on Grace to warn her that her good name is threatened by the impending exposure of Standish and is insulted for her pains.

CHAPTER XIII - Grace appeals to Standish to give up the fight in order to protect her name. He refuses.

CHAPTER XIV - Grace sends for Miss Kelly, apologizes for her rudeness and begs Wanda's assistance. Wanda declares she will never betray the woman.

CHAPTER XV - Grace pleads with Governor Robertson to withhold the Standish story for the sake of the woman. She pleads in vain.

CHAPTER XVI - The machine attempts again to force Standish out of the fight, without success. Blake calls up the Associated Press to order the publication of the story, but is cut off and communication is restored too late to get the story in the morning papers.

"Hello!" Blake was calling wrathfully. "Hello! What in blue blazes is the matter? You've cut us off, central. 'Wre won't work? Tell you it's got to work!—Hey?—What's that?—'Out of order?—And I haven't sixty seconds to wait! I must!—What?—Oh, a lot of good your being sorry does!—Say!—Who am I talking to, anyway?—Miss Kelly? Well—I'll be—"

Blake dropped the receiver on to its hook and set down the instrument with the most profane bang ever heard. "A damn without words," Nelligan afterward called it. Jim glanced again at his watch.

"Gentlemen," he announced with dangerous calm, "we're too late. Miss Kelly has seen fit to interfere. They'll have gone to press by now."

"Mr. Standish," cut in Van Dyke's suave voice, "you were about to say—"

"I've changed my mind," replied Standish, with a covert glance at Grace, who was leaning for support on a corner of the desk. "Good night, gentlemen."

He left the suite. Grace, more dead than alive, made her way blindly across the library to the door leading to her own rooms.

The others stood staring at one another. Downstairs Wanda Kelly smiled peacefully to herself and fluffed out a strand of her hair that had strayed over her forehead.

CHAPTER XVII.

Preparing the Grill. In the dumb disappointment that fell over the group in Mark Robertson's library, the men's eyes gradually turned as by common consent upon Jim Blake. Unruffled, he stood there, master of them all and even master of himself.

"Gentlemen," he drawled at last, "we've got our work cut out for us. We've missed the morning papers. Now, it remains to get our story on the floor of the house tonight. To some adjournment. That will give us time."

"But," objected Van Dyke, pointing to the duplicate telephone list, "we

can't get those numbers traced until tomorrow. And we've got to get the name before we dare spread the story in the house. It was different with the newspapers. But—"

"We shall get the woman's name in the next hour," Blake assured him.

"How?"

"Through the only person left who can tell us what the right number is. The phone girl who interfered with our wire just now. Nelligan, go down and tell Perry I want to see Miss Kelly up here at once. Bring her up, yourself. Now, then, Mark," as Nelligan departed on his errand, "it's up to you. If the house knows we've got the goods on Standish, fully twenty men like Gregg, here, will weaken and vote for us. And then we can jam the bill through. Get this woman's name. Find the number we want. You've got the reputation of being the best cross-examiner at the New York bar. Show you deserve that reputation. Take this telephone girl and turn her brains inside out. She knows the number that will lead to the woman. You've got to get it from her. Don't handle her with gloves or be afraid of making her cry. It's life or death for us to know that number."

There was a knock at the door. Gregg answered it. Nelligan entered, all but showing Wanda Kelly in ahead of him.

"Here she is," he reported. Leaving her standing there, he turned and ostentatiously closed the door behind him.

The girl looked about at the faces that confronted her on every side. Then she smiled. It was the peaceful smile of the kitten that has just emptied the cream jug. In her throat her heart was hammering to strangulation.

Mark Robertson, from his place at the head of the table, was the first to speak. His voice was quiet, his manner courteous.

"This is Miss Kelly?" he asked. "Yes, sir," replied the demure Wanda in her most respectful—and unnatural—shop-girl accents.

"Miss Kelly," resumed Mark, "you are the telephone operator, downstairs?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were at the switchboard a few minutes ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sit down, my dear girl!" beamed Blake tenderly, as he indicated the chair that had been placed for her. "We would like to ask you a few questions, if you don't object."

"Yes, sir."

Midway between Blake and Robertson, Wanda sat—waiting. And, on the other side of the closed door leading from the farther recesses of the suite, Grace listened, breathless.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Third Degree. "Miss Kelly," began Mark, after a full minute of a silence that bit into Wanda's very nerves, "you say you were at the switchboard downstairs a few moments ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"While I was talking to the Associated Press office?"

"How can I tell, sir?" she asked with smiling helplessness. "You know we're not allowed to listen to conversations over the wire."

"But you connected me when I called up 4400 Main just now?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"H'm! You remember that, do you? Well, that is the number of the Associated Press office. I called up Jennings, the manager. I talked with him a minute. Then he wanted to speak with Mr. Blake."

"Yes, sir?" asked Wanda, who had been following his recital with the wide-eyed delighted interest of a child listening to a wondrous fairy tale.

"Mr. Blake took the telephone instrument from my hands," pursued Mark, unheeding, "and spoke into it."

Wanda turned slowly and gazed upon Blake in pensive amazement that he could have performed so sensational a feat as Mark had just described. Then she looked back at Mark as though unwilling to miss a single word of such an enthralling narrative.

"But," continued Mark, "when he tried to speak to Jennings he found the connection had suddenly been severed."

"Oh!"

There was a world of sympathetic regret in her exclamation.

"He was told," said Mark slowly, "he was told—by you, Miss Kelly—that the line was out of order."

"Oh, yes!" she cried brightly. "And that must have been why the connection was cut off. What a shame! Just when he wanted to talk, too!"

"I suppose," said Mark carelessly, "if the line had got out of order, the manager's office would know of it by this time?"

"Oh, yes."

"Very good," reaching for the instrument. "I'll call up the manager and ask about it."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, mome-

"The Number?" Echoed Wanda, absently.

partly off guard. "It's—it's probably all right again by now."

"Very likely," was Mark's dry assent. "Then you don't want me to call up the manager?"

"Don't bother to do that," she faltered in confusion. "I—I might possibly have knocked out the plug—by accident."

"And you might possibly have done it on purpose," retorted Mark.

"I?" she asked, astounded. "Why should I do such a foolish thing as that?"

"That's what we're going to find out. If it had been an accident, you would have shoved the plug back into place, immediately, when we told you, isn't that true?"

"I s'pose so," she admitted sulkily.

"Then, Miss Kelly, we are forced to believe that you deliberately refused to transmit our message."

"You can believe anything you want to," she returned spitefully. "I don't care what you believe!"

The line of questioning had thrown her off her carefully prepared line of defense. Angry, confused, she tossed aside her useless weapons and was for the instant merely a worried and much badgered little girl.

"Is it not true," repeated Robertson in measured query, "that you deliberately refused to transmit our message just now?"

"I s'pose so," she vouchsafed. "I butted in. And now I guess I've got to take my medicine."

"And," asked Mark, "do you happen to realize what that medicine is?"

"Oh, I know, all right. I'll lose my job."

"Exactly. And you don't want to lose your job, do you, Miss Kelly?"

"No, I don't. I need the money."

"I see. Quite so. You need the money. Miss Kelly, Mr. Blake has offered you a great deal of money for a certain bit of information, hasn't he?"

"Yes. But—Oh, what's the use? You can get me fired. But I guess I can find another job!"

"It may not be necessary," suggested Mark. "Miss Kelly, we don't want to harm your prospects in any way. We wish merely to show you that it is to your interest to work for us. Mr. Blake has told you how necessary it is for us to gain the information that you alone can give us. He will pay you well. We have asked you to come up here tonight to find out whether you will not accept this offer."

"Well," she inquired in weary patience, "what is it you want me to tell you?"

"We want you," replied Mark, "to tell us a number called up by Mr. Standish early this evening."

He paused for her answer. The others leaned forward.

Wanda alone was unconcerned. She was twisting the little bracelet on her wrist and eyeing it with new and happily absorbed interest from a dozen successive points of view.

"Miss Kelly," demanded Mark, "will you tell us that number or will you not?"

"Why," answered Wanda with a charmingly foolish smile of crass helplessness, "I really don't think I can remember it."

"I think you can," contradicted Mark. "You knew beforehand, from Mr. Blake, how much depended on it. You surely remember."

"That's so," acceded Wanda, seeming to grasp the strength of his argument as by inspiration. "I surely must. But, you see, it's against the rules to tell. Oh, gentlemen," she cried longingly, "I'd just love to help you out. Anything I could do. Anything at all. But we're not allowed to give any information like this. Oh, how I wish—!"

"If you were allowed, then," asked Mark, "you'd do it, wouldn't you?"

"That'd be different, of course," she smiled. "But you see how I'm fixed—"

"That's too bad!" mused Mark. "Of course we can't ask you to break the company's rules. But if it were not against rules, you'd do it, would you?"

"Oh, in a second! I'd be ever so glad to; but, you see, orders are orders. And—"

"And," chimed in Mark, "luckily we know how faithful you are to your employers. Here," taking a paper from a heap on the table, "is an order from your general manager, authorizing you to give us all the help in your power. Does that remove your scruples?"

For an instant she sat genuinely dumfounded. One by one her defenses were being shorn away. With a great effort she strove to rally her pitiful little forces to meet the new onslaught.

"Oh, then," she broke down weakly, "I s'pose I'd better tell you."

Her surrender snapped the tension. Blake nodded grim approval. The other listeners relaxed. Even Robertson's hard mouth softened in exultation.

"That's right!" applauded Mark. "You won't be sorry for it."

"Well," asked Mark, "what was the number?"

"The number?" echoed Wanda absently. "Was it a district number?" queried Mark, his face giving no sign of anything but desire to refresh her memory.

"Oh, yes!" cried Wanda, her eyes brightening. "A district number. Yes. I remember that it was a district number."

"What exchange?"

"A further futile ransacking of the mind."

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