

The Woman.

(Continued from page 6, Col. 3.)

Van Dyke ran a searching finger down the list he held. "You are quite sure, Miss Kelly, that it was 678 Takoma?"

"Oh, yes, indeed!" Wanda assured him in eager triumph. "678 Takoma. I remember."

"It wasn't 876 Takoma?"

"Oh, no, sir, 678."

Mark glanced at Van Dyke, who shook his head. The cross-examiner's tone grew all at once as cold as death.

"You have been playing with us long enough, Miss Kelly," said he. "I let it go on until I was certain you meant to lead us on a wild-goose chase. Now, if you please, we'll get down to business."

"Why?" asked Wanda in marveling innocence. "Wasn't that number the right one, after all?"

"No. And you knew it was not. No such number was called from this hotel."

"Oh! Then you got the duplicate slips from central? Perhaps, if you'd let me look over them, I could—"

"Could send us on the wrong track? I have no doubt you could. No, thank you. You see, we can investigate these numbers without you. It's merely a question of investigating each of them and—"

"Then," demanded Wanda, "why did you bother to ask me?"

"To save time."

"Oh! And we've been saving time, have we, sir?"

"No," he returned with ominous calm, "we haven't. But we've found out exactly where you stand in the matter, Miss Kelly. We—"

"Then," flashed Wanda, shaking her manifold affections from her like a garment, "then you know I won't tell. And if I don't, you know you can't find out. You haven't time. You said so yourself. You've only got a few hours at most. And before you can strike another trail the Woman will be on her guard!"

Mark glowered at her in silence. Then he picked up the list that Van Dyke had just laid down.

"Many of these numbers," he said, half to himself, "can be eliminated at once. For instance, here's my own call to New York—1001 Plaza—"

"They've charged you for two calls, Mark," commented Van Dyke, glancing at the list over Robertson's shoulder. "See? Plaza 1001—twice. One directly under the other."

"Yes," said Mark, "they must have repeated it in copying the list. That makes two less for us to look up. We'll trace the number we want, sooner or later. Why won't you be sensible, Miss Kelly, and talk terms?"

"Because I don't like the work. It looks too rank for anyone but a statesman. I'm not to be bought for that kind of—"

"I see," said Mark reflectively. "Now let us get back to the other matter: to your interference with our wire."

He hesitated, leaned across to Van Dyke and whispered. Van Dyke nodded, rose and crossed to a case tiered ceiling-high with law books.

"You spoke just now, Miss Kelly," continued Robertson, "of taking your medicine. And I asked you if you knew what sort of medicine it might be."

"Don't rub it in," she snapped. "I'm going to lose my job. Let it go at that. A bunch of the nation's representative men have combined, in an all-night session, to throw a telephone operator out of work. And they've succeeded. We'll take that for granted. I'll leave you to do your celebrating of the mighty victory without me. I'm going. I congratulate you all. You've lost the Mullins bill fight. But, instead, you've won on your great fight to make me lose my job. That ought to help some. And it proves that even if you can't lick a man like Standish you're still live wires."

"One moment, Miss Kelly," intervened Mark, opening the calfskin volume Van Dyke had just brought him from the book-shelves. "You spoke of losing your job. I'm afraid that isn't all you'll lose."

"No," she agreed, "I'll lose the blood money I could have raked in if I'd sold you the Woman's name."

"And your liberty."

"My—my—what?"

"Your liberty, Miss Kelly," repeated Mark, eying the startled girl with stormy unconcern.

"You mighty finance jugglers live so long on the razor edge of jail," she scoffed with a bravado that somehow would not ring true, "that you ought to be experts on all the stunts people can be locked up for. But this time the bluff's too thin."

Robertson did not answer at once. Indeed, he did not seem to hear. He was turning the pages of the law book before him. Presently he found what he wanted.

"Miss Kelly," he said, "as a telephone operator, you must have had your attention called to Section 641 of the Penal Code. Have you not?"

"Yes," she returned defiantly, "I have."

"Then," resumed Mark in the manner of a magistrate of the old school, "you must realize that by refusing, as an operator, to transmit our message over the telephone, you broke the law."

"But I—"

"You have admitted in the presence of witnesses that you interfered in the transmission of our message. You are aware, by the terms of Section 641, you have thus rendered yourself liable to—"

he read from the volume, "a fine of one thousand dollars or one year's imprisonment or both!"

"And," panted Wanda, "you'll do that to a phone girl, just because she tries to be decent?"

"We don't want to," politely evaded Robertson.

CHAPTER XIX.

Represented by Counsel.

The outer door opened with Jack-in-the-box suddenness and Tom Blake was in the cleared space where Wanda stood at bay.

"What's the matter?" he demanded of her eagerly. "The clerk just told me they'd sent for you to come up here. I was afraid it was about that wretched number. So I came—"

"You're a mind reader," she sneered, nevertheless looking up at him with a gratitude very like adoration. "They've lost the chance to harm one woman. They're taking out the grudge on another."

"So it was about the number?"

"It was. But it isn't. It's about my going to jail."

"What?"

"For breaking the connection a while ago when they were sending orders over the wire about the Standish story. They've flashed Section 641 on me. Jail or fine. I'm to get both!"

"You'll get neither," roared Tom. "You're a fine line of men, all of you, to bully and browbeat one poor kid of a girl. Well, you've done all of it you're going to. I'm here now. And I'll—"

"Oh, Tom," grunted Jim Blake in tired disgust, "you're worse than a collic pup with fleas. Keep out of this."

"Miss Kelly," formally asked Tom, "may I act as your counsel?"

"You bet you can!" was the girl's fervid response.

"Since you insist on interfering, Tom," said Robertson, "I consent to recognize you as counsel for Miss Kelly. You are a lawyer and you know we can do what your father has said we can. We can legally send Miss Kelly to prison as an operator who has violated the law. She has admitted her guilt in the presence of witnesses—"

"Lord! Why didn't I get here sooner?"

"I have, technically, a perfect case. Now, as her counsel, do you want this matter settled privately, here and

now? Or do you prefer a formal charge and a public trial?"

"You can't force the situation like this," cried Tom. "It's conspiracy!"

"Is it?" retorted Mark coolly. "Very good. Since you choose to take that tone, we will simply call your bluff by arresting her. Nelligan, go and get a plain-clothes man. Tell the captain it's for Jim Blake. Bring the man back with you and have him within call."

"We're kind of up against it, aren't we, Tom?" whispered Wanda as Nelligan departed on his mission.

"Miss Kelly," said Robertson, eying the girl sharply, "I have conducted many cases, but I confess this puzzles me. There is something in it I cannot understand. We offer you the alternative of prison—Mr. Blake has offered you money. And still you refuse us. There's some strong personal motive that makes you oppose use. Is—"

"Oh, I've got motive enough in opposing the machine, if it comes to that!" interrupted Wanda. "In the first place, my father was Frank E. Kelly."

Mark's face stiffened with surprise. Greg and Van Dyke glanced at each other, half-awed. Jim Blake alone gave no sign of disturbance. Glancing amissly at Wanda from between his slitted eyes, he drawled:

"Frank E. Kelly, hey? So you're trying to get back at me, young woman?"

"Put it that way if you like," returned Wanda fiercely. "But there is more than that. I'm against you and all the dirty machine in every way. Why? Because I've got the bad luck to be one of the people. I'm—"

The telephone jangled into the rush of her talk. Jim Blake picked up the instrument.

"Hello," he queried, "that you, Burns? Instructions, hey? I gave 'em. Keep Winthrop talking till he drops, then get Mullins recognized and let him talk all night if he can; or till I'm ready to break in. Delay—that's the idea—delay! Hold the floor and delay. What? Oh, in a little while now, I guess. Don't worry."

"Miss Kelly," said Mark, "you still refuse to answer my questions?"

"I refuse everything," exulted Wanda. "You and the machine are locked to a standstill. And I helped to do it. That's easy worth a good whole year in jail."

"Your motives for working against us?" he insisted. "I mean, are you

shielding anyone?"

"Of course I am. I'm shielding the Woman you're after."

"Do you know who she is?"

"No."

"Gregg," ordered Robertson, turning to the highly-entertained Kansan, "will you go and get Standish? Ask him to come here."

"All right," rustily assented Gregg, making sadly for the outer door.

"Don't try to stick it out, girl," exhorted Blake. "You can't afford to get square with me at this price."

"Can't I? Wait and see."

"Do you know Standish, personally?" called Mark.

"No, I don't."

"You want him to win, then, just for political reasons?"

"That's it."

"If any other man than Standish were fighting the organization, you would act as you are now?"

"Yes," said Wanda, thankful to feel her feet planted once more on solid ground, and breathing the more easily for the safer turn the questions were taking.

"And," continued Mark, "if any other woman were in danger you would still oppose us in this way?"

"Yes."

"Then," cried Mark in quick triumph, "you do know who she is!"

"I—no! I didn't say so!" murmured Wanda, wholly at a loss.

"You didn't mean to say so," corrected Mark; "but you admitted it."

"I didn't! I didn't!" confusedly reiterated Wanda.

The long strain was telling on her. Her wits, usually so agile, now moved with palpable effort. The quick brain felt like hot lead. Yet she rallied her lagged-out forces, wearily repeating:

"I didn't!"

"Miss Kelly," urged Mark, "your name won't appear in this. No one need know it was you who put us on the track."

"I won't tell!"

"Then," Mark exclaimed roughly, "we can do nothing more. Van Dyke, telephone down and see if—Oh, here you are, Nelligan! Get that plain-clothes man downstairs!"

Nelligan nodded. Meanwhile Tom was whispering friendly to Wanda.

"Tell me the name, dear. I won't tell the others. But it may show me a way to help you out. And we're in a horrible fix."

"I know that—but I won't tell!" Tom whirled about on the others.

"Dad! Mark!" he said. "Before you go any further I want you to know I've asked Miss Kelly to be my wife."

"No, no!" cried Wanda, trying to throw her open hand across his mouth. "Don't—"

"If she consents," rushed on Tom, "I'll marry her at once! Whether in prison or out. I love her. For my sake won't you?"

"I'm very sorry, Tom," replied Mark, "but she's not your wife, yet. And she has her release in her own hands. She has only to speak—"

"Dad!" appealed the boy.

"Not on your worthless life," growled Blake. "That's the very thing she's been working up to all the time. I knew it and I've been waiting for this. Her price is my consent. And I won't pay it. That's what I meant when I said the price was too high."

"If you've any influence with her, Tom," remarked his brother-in-law, "you'll use it to make her tell."

"He hasn't any influence!" retorted Wanda before Tom could speak. "Except that his standing by me against you all proves to me I'm doing right. And—do you think, Jim Blake, that I'd marry a son of yours? Not if he was John D. Rockefeller and E. H. Sothern rolled into one. Not till I've squared my account with you."

"You won't marry a son of Jim Blake's?" echoed Tom. "Well, after tonight I'm not Jim Blake's son. Here's where I cut loose and—"

"Go as far as you like," vouchsafed his father, outwardly unmoved. "But the girl tells us or else she goes to jail."

"I won't tell!"

"Mark, ring for the officer—"

"There he is at the door," answered Robertson as the buzzer sounded. "Let him in, Nelligan."

"I won't tell!"

Nelligan opened the door. Standish stood on the threshold. Tom, who had

leaped forward pugnaciously, drew back.

"Come in, Mr. Standish," said Mark. "I suppose Gregg explained the situation to you."

"That is why I am here," curtly answered Standish.

"You know, then," went on Mark, "that she is ready to face imprisonment to shield you?"

"That is what Mr. Gregg told me. I don't understand—"

"Neither do we. But we thought you might feel like saving her from punishment."

"How?"

"By voting with us on the Mullins bill."

"No."

"You will accept her sacrifice, then?"

"I—I have no alternative."

Then, before any of them knew of her presence, Grace was in the room and had caught her husband's arm as he lifted the receiver from the hook.

"You shall not!" she was crying.

CHAPTER XX.

The Last Card.

Wanda was first to see her, even before Mark felt the restraining clasp on his arm.

"Mrs. Robertson!" cried the telephone girl in terror; intuition telling her why Grace was there.

"Grace!" called Tom joyously. "Help us! You'll make everything right. You always do."

"Father," said Grace in eager appeal, "you won't go on with this? It is abominable!"

"I'm sorry, daughter; but we've got to. I wish you'd clear out. It's no place—"

"But, father, can't you see? Miss Kelly is protecting some poor woman who has done wrong and who has repented. Must she be punished so? Must the Woman's years of repentance all count for nothing?"

"That's no concern of ours," said Mark. "The Woman's possible repentance is between her and her God. We—"

"Then leave her punishment to God. It's not for you to say how she shall suffer. You are striking with the blindness of a man; without dreaming where the blow will fall."

"It will fall where it is deserved. I'm enough of a believer in divine justice to know that."

"It will fall on her husband more heavily than on her."

"It will do no harm to know the type of woman he's married."

"It isn't fair! It isn't fair! Mark, your injustice to this girl here is a thousandfold worse than your cruelty to the Woman. It is wicked to punish Wanda Kelly for her loyalty in trying to save a friend from disgrace. It's cowardly—unbelievable!"

"Steady, daughter! Steady!" admonished Blake, amazed at his usually well-poised child's vehemence.

"You're all worked up over this. It isn't like you to—"

"No," agreed Mark, "it isn't. That is what has been puzzling me."

He was eying Grace strangely. The lightning quick and accurate faculty of deduction that had won his first success at the bar was stirring strongly within him.

"Grace," he commanded, his voice still gentle, but with a ring of iron behind its suavity, "look at me!"

Slowly, as by hard physical effort, she raised her panic-widened eyes to meet his gaze.

"You know this Woman's name," he declared.

At the mastery that vibrated through his voice and look, she faltered, through no conscious volition of her own:

"Yes."

"You know the name," pursued Mark, still gripping his wife's brain by the magnetism that was almost hypnotic power. "We still have time to use it. Tell it to me."

"No—no!" she murmured distractedly. "I—I can't. I won't. I—"

"Grace!" and now the iron glinted more openly through the velvet sheathing, "do you mean to say you are going to let us face ruin when one word from you would—"

"I tell you, I can't—I can't!"

Mark shifted his attack with unexpected swiftness.

"Mr. Standish is willing," said he, "to see this girl here terribly punished for protecting the guilty Woman. Are you?"

"No, no! But—"

"Mrs. Robertson!" broke in Wanda, first of all to detect the note of weakness in Grace's voice. "Don't tell! Don't tell! Keep your nerve. It's all right. Never you mind what they threaten to do to me. Don't give her away!"

"Shut up!" roared Nelligan.

Mark's eyes had never for an instant left his wife's face. At the horror that now deepened in it he saw what his next and crowning move must be.

"Nelligan," he ordered, "take this phone girl downstairs and turn her over to the officer who is waiting. Van Dyke will be around at the station-house in a few minutes to make the charge. And he'll see that she is held in bail too heavy for her friends to pay."

"Nelligan!" yelled Tom, springing in front of the giant henchman as the latter moved toward Wanda. "If you put a finger on her I'll—"

"No!" yelled Grace in the same breath. "You shan't arrest her, Mark. I can't bear it! I—"

"You'll tell!" asked Mark, exultant at the success of his ruse.

"I—yes!"

(Continued next week.)

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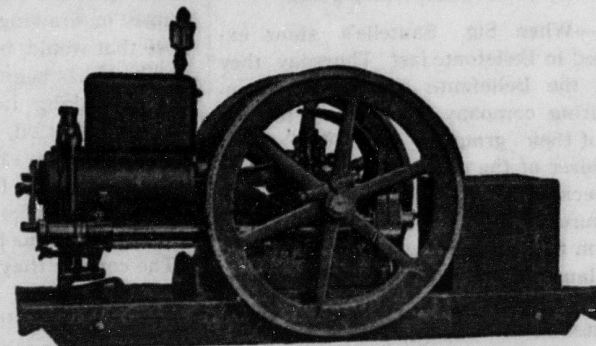
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