

The WOMAN

A Novel by Albert Payson Terhune

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

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(Concluded.)

"Pardon me, Robertson," intervened Standish, as he saw Grace's last barrier break down; "but I advise you to clear the room before you let her speak. Three people here already know the name. I advise you to keep the number as small as possible."

"That is our affair, not yours," retorted Mark. "She shall tell us all inside of a few hours the whole country is going to know that name."

"Mark," begged Grace, "let me tell it to you alone!"

"No," refused the husband. "It's too late now to spare any one's feelings. And witnesses are necessary in an affair like this. It concerns us all. And we must move quickly."

"Mr. Standish," he went on with a savage joy that rent away the last remnant of the velvet from the iron beneath. "It's been a long fight. But you couldn't beat the organization. You've been howling for a fight to a finish. This is the finish."

"It is the finish," agreed Standish, his deep voice infinitely sad. "And I will have to see you here, gentlemen. And I will have to see you here to reach the capitol before the bill comes to a vote. Good night."

He looked furtively at Grace. But she was staring blankly ahead of her with eyes that saw nothing.

"Good night," he repeated. "I would have spared you, Robertson. But you would have it."

And he was gone. His words had fallen on deaf ears. The men were leaning forward eagerly to catch Grace's first syllable.

"And now," Mark demanded, as his wife still hesitated, "who is she, Grace?"

Blake had forestalled her answer. He crossed the room to the telephone. "We win!" he was chuckling. "It's a way we've got. Hell's full of losers. And I'm still loss-proof."

"What are you going to do?" queried Van Dyke, who had dropped back in his chair a few moments earlier, taking no longer even a passive part in the scene.

"I'm going to phone Gregg to let the house know the whole story; names, dates and all. By the time I get on the wire Grace will have told."

"Hold on, Jim," objected Van Dyke. "Not yet."

"Not yet?" What'd ye mean? Why not? We're almost against the ropes over there at the capitol. This is our last punch and it's going to be a knockout."

"Wait, Jim!" begged Van Dyke. "Wait till you hear the name."

"We've got the name. Grace is going to tell us."

"You've got it, yes. But you can't use it, Jim."

Blake, telephone instrument in hand, ceased to glare down in angry amazement at the saturnine lawyer who so calmly opposed him in the hour of victory.

"Why in blazes can't we use it?" he blustered. "Are you weakening?"

He took the receiver from the hook. But Van Dyke, with a peremptory gesture, halted him.

"Wait, I say!" ordered the lawyer. "Nelligan, go downstairs and get rid of that officer. And don't come back."

"Go with him, Tom," whispered Wanda. "For my sake. You don't want to hear the name."

"You're right," assented Tom, following in Nelligan's wake. "It's none of my business. Now that you are safe—"

The door closed behind the two departing men.

"Come, Grace," prompted Mark. "Who is she?"

Grace's lips paled. But they were dry and cracked. Her tongue would not stir.

CHAPTER XXI.

Jim Blake, Loser. And so for an instant they stood. It was an odd tableau: Grace, helpless, shaking, dumb; Wanda, her arms clasped protectingly about the unheeding Woman, who did not so much as realize their presence nor feel the warm sympathy of their embrace; Mark, his triumph tinged with impatience at his wife's hesitation; Blake, still gripping the telephone and glowering in angry surprise at the lawyer; Van Dyke grim, alert, master of the moment, his lean face set in lines of unwonted sadness.

And it was Van Dyke who broke the brief silence. His precise dry voice was tinged by a note of something almost solemn as he addressed Robertson.

"Mark," he said, "Miss Kelly has told us that she promised—the Woman not to tell. When did she make that promise?"

"What does that matter now?" snapped Mark. "We—"

"She never heard of the affair until early this evening. So it must be since then that she talked with the Woman about it. Miss Kelly has been on duty downstairs ever since six o'clock. She has not left this hotel. How could she have communicated with the Woman?"

"By telephone. If—"

"I think not," denied Van Dyke, the cold sorrow in his voice now apparent to every one. "The Woman is here in this house."

"So much the better!" declared Blake, again picking up the telephone.

Van Dyke, in gloomy wonder, turned on his chief.

"You have often boasted, Jim," said he, "that you owe your success to the fact you see things just a second sooner than other people. Don't you understand—even yet?"

"No," growled Blake, "I don't. Out with it, man! What are you trying to get at? Don't beat about the bush. You're wasting time that we haven't got."

Van Dyke faced Robertson; his lean face working.

"Mark," he said, tapping the duplicate telephone list, "your house in New York is charged here with two calls. We thought it was a mistake—"

A wordless gurgle from Jim Blake interrupted him. The telephone was set down by a hand that shook as though from palsy. For a single instant the heavy-lidded eyes were wholly, starkly unveiled in a glare of unbelieving horror. Then they turned stupidly upon Grace who bowed her head in a spasm of hysterical unchecked weeping before the panic query in their gaze.

Wanda Kelly wound her arms tighter about the heavy body. But Grace neither felt the contact nor heard the whisper of eager futile comforting. Blake stared open-mouthed, his face greenish and flabby, the stern jaw loose, the keen eyes bulging. Mark Robertson was still frowning perplexedly at Van Dyke.

"Don't you understand?" pleaded the latter.

"No, I don't," returned Mark. "What have the two phone calls to my home got to do with—?"

"Suppose the second call were not a mistake?" hesitated Van Dyke.

Robinson's face went purple. The big veins near his temples swelled grotesquely. He took an involuntary step toward Van Dyke. The latter raised a protesting hand.

"Mark," he said, flinching not at all before the bloodshot fury in the husband's little eyes, "we are here as lawyers, making an investigation. At last we have struck the right trail. I am sorry it leads where it does. I—"

His got no further. At a stride Robertson was beside his wife. Roughly brushing aside Wanda's embracing arms he caught Grace by the shoulder and held her.

"You hear what this man insinuates?" he cried thickly. "I don't ask you to foul your lips by denying it. I'll attend to him later. But give me the right to do that by telling the Woman's name at once."

"Grace!" croaked Blake, his throat

Gathered Her into His Arms as Though She Were a Baby.

sounded with a horror that he would not confess, "don't you hear what they're saying, girl?"

In his harsh eagerness, Mark forcibly lifted his wife's bent head and forced her eyes to meet his.

"What's the matter?" he demanded sharply. "Why don't you speak? Tell Van Dyke he lies. Tells him he lies, I say! Oh!"

His fierce appeal broke off in a cry of pain. He had at last raised his face and had read it. For the briefest moment he stood stupefied, expressionless. Then, cautiously, half-cringingly, as if expecting a blow, he moved back to Van Dyke.

"Why, Grace!" expostulated Blake, in pitiful bravado. "You're crazy! You don't know what you're implying—what you're letting them think. I won't believe it. Not a word of it. It's a trick to—"

She caught his shaking hand and murmured a broken incoherent syllable or two amid the passion of her sobs.

"Almighty!"

Blake's legs gave way and he sprawled inert into a chair, his head on his breast. He had all at once grown old—very, very old. Meantime,

Robertson had forced his own dazed brain back into a semblance of its former strong control.

"Van Dyke," he said as calmly as if he were giving a routine order, "you will have every trace of this story destroyed tonight. It must never get beyond this room. I can count on you!"

"Certainly," agreed Van Dyke with equal coolness.

There was no hint in his voice or in his manner that Mark's command entailed the defeat of a bill, the collapse of millions of dollars worth of stocks, a probably panic on Wall street and the money interests' total if temporary loss of power in congress. For the moment, the great corporation lawyer chanced to be also a man.

On his way from the room, Van Dyke paused beside Blake's chair.

"Jim," he said hesitatingly, "I'm going over to the capitol. Shall I tell Mullins to let the bill come to a vote?"

"Yes," answered Blake, without stirring or so much as looking up.

"Yes," he said again, and his voice was dead. "Yes—I'm—I'm licked."

As Van Dyke opened the door, Wanda made as though to follow him.

"If you don't need me any further, Mr. Blake," she said gently, "I'll go."

Blake lifted a palsied hand in negation.

"In there," he muttered, pointing toward the door that led to the inner rooms. "I must speak to you—afterward."

When the old man raised his eyes, Mark and Grace alone were left in the room with him. Robertson was standing motionless unseeing. Grace's sobs broke the tense silence, as she fought weakly for self-control. Blake crossed over to her. She rose at his approach.

"Daughter," said Blake, almost timidly, "they're all gone. None of them will tell. But there's one thing we've got to know. I'm with you, no matter what you've done. But—but—tell me—that—that this was all over—and done with—before you married Mark!"

"Father!"

The Woman faced him in dry-eyed horror. Every trace of weeping was seared away by the flame of sudden indignation. And, at the sight, Jim Blake gave a great wordless cry and gathered her into his arms as though she were a baby.

"Oh, my little girl!" he choked, "Dad's own, own little girl! We've been tearing your poor heart to pieces and your old father was the bitterest against you. It's all right, I tell you, girl. It's all right. Dad'll see you through. You shan't be bothered. There, there! Oh, don't cry like that, darling. Don't!"

His voice grew husky. Leaving her abruptly, he crossed to Robertson.

"Mark," he faltered, avoiding his son-in-law's eye, "you promised to protect her. This is the time to do it. It was 'for better, for worse.' If that vow is any good at all, it's a good for 'worse' as for 'better.' Mark—be gentle with her, boy."

He seemed about to say more. But, glancing furtively at Mark's set changeless face, he forebore.

Slowly, with bent shoulders and dragging step Blake made his way to the big room's farthest end. There, in the window's embrasure, out of earshot, his back to the others, he halted.

Drawing aside the curtains he glanced out into the night. The gloom of the sleeping city was below and around him. But, in one black mass, tiers upon tiers of garish lights glowed. There, in the capitol, the Mullins bill was coming to a vote. There, Matthew Standish, freed by a miracle from the toils that craftier men had woven about him, was winning the victory which was to clear for him the pathway to the very summit of political power.

But he found his subconscious self straying from the picture he was so ruthlessly drawing. His mind would not fix itself on the lighted capitol and the wreck of his life-work; but crept over back into the dim room behind him. Even his tongue tricked him. For when he would have made it recite further the tale of his losses, it mumbled brokenly:

"My own little girl! Dad's own, own little girl!"

CHAPTER XXII.

The Hour of Reckoning. Mark Robertson and his wife, left alone, together, in the other end of the great library, faced the situation for which Grace had so long been preparing and for which her frightened years of preparation had proved so useless.

He knew. That was all. And no word of hers could gloss over or make bearable the truth. Wherefore she spoke no word, but stood looking at him; taking in every detail of the stout figure and the strong commonplace face as though she wished to carry with her forever their memory.

Mark strove for speech. But for the first time in his roughly aggressive career, suitable words were denied him. Alternately he longed to tell her in named terms what she was and how utterly he despised her. Again, a gust of self-pity urged him to reproach her for the wrecking of his ideals, the blasting of his happiness. Vainly coming part way to his aid, he framed—and left unspoken—a curt sentence of farewell. And, in the end, all he could say was:

"Why didn't you tell me?"

It was not what he had intended to say. It was banal. It expressed none of the stark moods that seethed in him. Yet, as she did not answer, he found himself asking once more:

"Why didn't you tell me?"

And now, unknown and unwished for, there crept into his bald question a note that was almost of entreaty.



And at the sound, the dumb devil that had locked Grace's lips departed.

"Tell you?" she echoed. "Oh, if you knew how I've wanted to!"

"Then—"

"I didn't dare. I didn't dare."

"Truth and honor surely—"

"Your love meant more to me than truth and honor. I sacrificed them to keep it. I would sacrifice them and everything else to get it back. Is that shameless? Perhaps. The truth usually is. If I had told you, you—"

"Then—"

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"Then—"

"I didn't dare. I didn't dare."

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