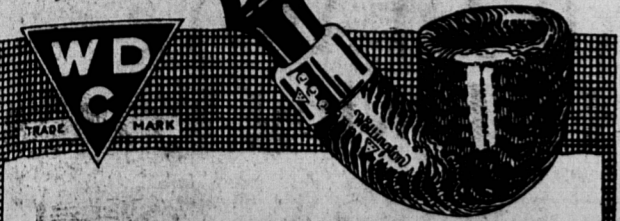


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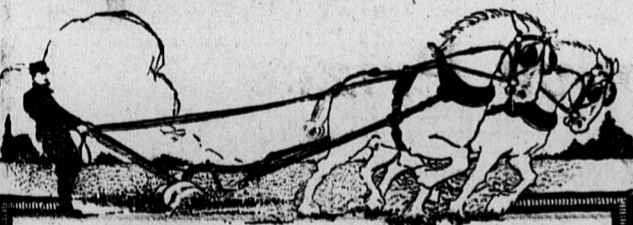
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The Promoter's Wife

(Continued from page two)

"I have my car outside. Won't you let me take you for a ride? We can talk just as well, and the air may do you good." The idea appealed to me and I hurried to put on my wraps. For a time, in the car, we did not speak. The air was delightfully fresh and it blew so refreshingly upon my aching head and tired eyes that I was glad to just lean back and enjoy the case it gave me. "Feeling better?" Mr. Frederick asked after a bit. "Very much better, thank you." "It is sad about Orton." "Very. But he has been an invalid so long I suppose Mrs. Orton was in a way, prepared for it—if we ever can be prepared for death." "But—he did not die of his old trouble. Haven't you heard anything about it?" "No. That he died last night, is all I know." "Oh, yes, he died very suddenly. The morning papers were full of it. Pneumonia, I believe." "I haven't seen a paper this morning," I replied, wondering why Neil had thought it necessary to remain out all night to comfort Mrs. Orton, when her husband's death could be nothing save a relief to her. "That he had been with her, I never doubted."

MR. FREDERICK'S WORDS WORRY BARBARA

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Why had Payne Orton had to die? Had he lived, Blanche would still be bound. Dead, it left her free to intrigue her husband.

Mr. Frederick spoke to me. I heard his voice, but I did not grasp anything he was saying. My mind was numb with the thought that had come to me.

Had Payne Orton, before he died, known of the intimacy of his wife and Neil? And had it made him careless of his health?

It was an hysterical woman's thought, but it gripped me. That he had been ill for long, that scarcely ever had he been able to accompany his wife anywhere since I had known them; and this "Tell me about that Mr. Scott—the man interested in Mexican mines," I spoke as casually as I could.

"Do you know him?" "Yes—he dined with us one night." "I shouldn't say he was—your sort. Not that Scott isn't all right as far as some things go; but he's hardly a man I would want you to meet."

The words had scarcely left his lips before he flushed and stammered an apology: "I had no right to say that! Your husband is the one who has the right to say who you shall or shall not meet. Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive—Neil Mr. Forbes, is connected in some business matters with Mr. Scott and that is the reason he brought him home with him. But he seems such a different type from any man I have known that I was curious." As usual, I had not the courage to go on with anything that looked like criticism of Neil.

Illness might have been caused by an added cold, never occurred to me. As nearly all women would have done, I took his sudden death to mean something to me, simply because my husband had shown a preference for the man's wife.

"What are you thinking of, that you won't speak to me?" Mr. Frederick's voice brought me back to a realization of my rudeness.

"Pardon me. I was so shocked by what you told me that I was most impolite. It is dreadful, dreadful!"

Payne Orton's love for his wife was a matter of common comment among his friends. Could it be possible that, because of some intrigue of hers, he had wanted to die? And was Neil the other party to the intrigue?

I tortured myself with the thought. Mr. Frederick was a shrewd man and doubtless understood more of the cause of my answers to his questions than I realized.

Finally he commenced to talk of Neil. Then I pulled myself together. Anything pertaining to my husband was vitally interesting to me.

"He has wonderfully staying powers. We all have to hand it to him for one thing," said Mr. Frederick, "if he makes up his mind to do anything, he will go through fire and water to accomplish it."

I thought I detected some subtle desire to comfort me by this praise of Neil—if it were praise, I would put my pride in my pocket and ask one or two questions.

I often used to wonder if all wives were as fearful of doing anything to lose the love of the man to whom they were married, as was I. I seemed to realize from the first days of our life together that Neil would brook no questioning of himself, his affairs. Every time I had attempted to get closer to him in

this way it had resulted disastrously. Had been the cause of the only quarrels we ever had had.

"He is a different type. Coarse, common, but absolutely straight in business. And hard as nails with those who are not. I have always said that I should be very sorry for anyone against whom Scott had a grudge. He'd flay them alive."

"That is the way he impressed me," I returned, then changed the subject. But in my mind was a new undercurrent of fear. Suppose this Mr. Scott should get a grudge against Neil because of some business they had in common—suppose because of that mining stock Neil had persuaded him to buy?—my thoughts went no further. Mr. Frederick commanded my attention.

There was something almost icy in me that tried relentlessly to probe into the heart of things that were causing me such anguish.

At midnight I went to my room. The dawn came and found me still at the window. I had not slept at all.

Tonko came to my door about eight o'clock. "Mr. Forbes will not breakfast at home. Shall madam be served?" Eight o'clock was our breakfast hour. "I haven't slept well. Bring me some coffee and toast." I told him through the closed door, then quickly disarranged the bed, and slipped into a negligee. All night long I had sat in my dinner gown, never thinking it uncomfortable because of the other thoughts which so filled my mind.

But less conveniences must be observed. Servants must not be given cause to gossip; though my heart ached and more than anything in the world did I want to shut myself away from their prying eyes.

But when the maid brought the tray I received her as usual. And detained her a moment upon some trivial matter. So do we women hide our emotions—so must we hide them.

To my surprise, about an hour later Mr. Frederick's card was brought to me. "Tell him I will be down in a few moments," I said, then hurried into a suitable gown.

This is a surprise after the way you talked yesterday," I said to him after we had exchanged greetings. "I really never expected to see you again."

"As bad as that?" his gray eyes held a twinkle. "Just as bad as that!"

"I had a few spare moments this morning and I could think of nothing better to do with them, nothing I so longed to do, as to spend them with you. So I took my courage in both hands and made a call at this unearthly hour—for New York."

"Oh, but I am so glad you did! I was just wondering what I should do to pass the time. I woke with a headache—I was afraid he would notice how tired I looked—and was just thinking I would order the car and take a ride. I am so glad you came before I did so."

MR. FREDERICK OFFERS TO BE BARBARA'S FRIEND CHAPTER XXXIX.

"I want to be your friend, Mrs. Forbes—if you ever should need one," Mr. Frederick was saying. "I am a bluff man, but there may come a time when you will be able to make me of use. Will you promise me that if there is such a time, that you will send for me?" he smiled at me, but his eyes were serious.

I almost laughed. It was so like some of the stories I had read. Was Mr. Frederick in love with me? I dismissed the thought at once. There had been absolutely nothing in his behavior to suggest such a thing, and I blushed hotly at my egotistical thought. But why should he be melodramatic—that was what it appeared to me. I laughed a little embarrassed laugh, then replied:

"I can't imagine a time when I should need you—anyone save Mr. Forbes—to do anything for me, but I will promise that if such a time

ever comes I will remember what you have said."

He laid a card in my lap. "That address will always reach me. A letter or wire there will find me wherever I am."

I made no reply. None was needed. But after Mr. Frederick had left me at home, and bade me good-bye because he was leaving town that afternoon, I decided that he had come to see me that morning simply to say that if I needed a friend, he would serve me.

Again I asked myself "Why?" It seemed at this time that my life was made up of interrogation points. I was continually asking the way of things but never getting an answer.

Neil came home about three o'clock—something so unusual for him, that I feared he was ill. His face had gone gray and haggard since the night before. When I commenced to fuss over him, he waved me aside, and said hoarsely:

"For heaven's sake, Bab, don't do that! I came home because I needed rest. If you are going to rag me about anything, I'll go back to the office."

"I did not mean to rag you, dear. You looked tired and I felt anxious." I was conciliatory, as usual.

"Well I am tired, dead tired. So tired I don't want to talk to you or anyone else." He threw himself upon the lounge in the library and closed his eyes. But I knew he was not sleeping. A spasm would occasionally cross his face and his hands were clenched until the knuckles stood out white and sharp against the dark cover I had thrown over him.

It was nearly two hours later when he rose, bathed and dressed for dinner. He was more like himself, and when Tonko had brought him his evening paper I ventured:

"Isn't it dreadful about Payne Orton? I could keep silent no longer. I must know something of his interest in this man's death."

"Terrible. Poor Blanche."

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"Did she appear to feel very badly?"

Neil looked curiously at me, as if he did not grasp my meaning. I repeated my question.

"How should I know? I haven't seen her. But it is natural to suppose such a thing would be an awful shock to her."

I felt like singing, for joy. A terrible weight seemed to be lifted from my heart. Neil had not been with Blanche Orton. Foolish me, to have sat all night eating my heart out with fear and jealousy. I would never mistrust him again. I vowed, never condemn him until I was sure.

Mr. Frederick was here today," I said, lacking strength for anything save commonplaces.

"What did he want?" a suspicious glance at me.

"Nothing save to say good-bye. He is leaving this afternoon. I thought of course you saw Mrs. Orton last night, Neil. You remember you went out as soon as you had answered the phone. I was so anxious when you did not return. I hoped he might explain his absence."

"Trust a woman for putting her own construction upon everything a man does."

(Continued on page ten)

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