



Woman AGAINST Woman

BY MRS. MARY E. HOLMES.

Author of "A Woman's Love," "The Wife's Secret," "A Heartless Woman," "Her Fatal Sin," "A Wife's Peril," "A Desperate Woman."

(Continued.)

Ill health is a luxury that only the rich can afford, and that no one can enjoy. Every woman is not so situated that she can be an interesting invalid, or rather, an uninteresting invalid, for there never was an interesting one.

The woman who suffers from weakness and disease of the distinctly feminine organs is certain to become an invalid. No woman can suffer in this way and be a healthy, happy, amiable wife and a competent mother. Troubles of this nature sap the strength, rack the nerves, paint lines of suffering upon the face, destroy the temper, make the once bright eyes dull and the once active brain sluggish, and transform a vivacious woman into a weak, sickly invalid.

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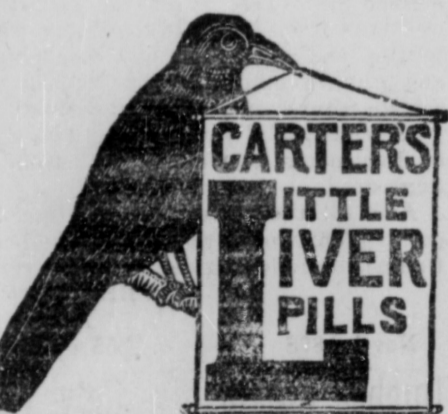
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The count stepped the loose mouse over his evening-dress and donned the slouched hat, then both men mounted the cart and drove slowly out of their hiding-place to the lonely country road that led through a deserted part to the old abbey ruins, while on the rough planks lay the still form of Roy Darrell's young wife, ignorant of the misery in store for her, wrapped in deep and dark oblivion.

Roy, Earl of Darrell, woke early next morning. A strange, delightful feeling filled his heart directly his eyes opened. What was it? Never in all his life had he experienced so great a happiness as seemed to live within him now.

A vision of a fair, pure, lovely face rose to his mind and solved the mystery. It was love. Yes, love had come to him—love for another, and that other not the stately, handsome Valerie Ross, but his simple, low-born wife, Lady Alice.

The memory of her girlish sweetness and manner of the night before, her faltering lips and great, wondrous, starlike eyes, made his heart thrill with a tenderness that amazed him.

Now he knew that he had never loved Valerie; he had admired and liked her, he had treasured her as a friend, but he had never loved till now.

True, he had thought of making her his wife, but his feelings had been born rather of admiration of her beauty and the knowledge that she would prove acceptable to his mother.

For a brief moment a vague passion filled his heart for her, but it had come from piqued pride and justice, when his dead friend Eustace Rivers maligned Valerie to him and dissuaded him from marrying her.

But all these feelings died down now as he contrasted the two women; everywhere he looked he seemed to see the sweet, fair face of his wife gazing at him, and at the vision his heart swelled. "How beautiful she was last night," was his thought as he hurriedly performed his toilet. "No lady of the land could have been more superb. There is blood in her veins as blue as flows in my Darrell—I know it; I am sure of it. Oh, how cruel we have been. How I have misjudged her! I have left her all these months—neglected, unhappy, and despaired. But now—now—all shall be changed. I feel as if a heavy cloud were rolled away from my life. Sunshine is everywhere, and blue sky—blue as the glorious radiance of her wonderful eyes—around me; but I must not startle her. How do I know she will forgive me—my poor, sweet darling? I will plead to her to-day. This very morning shall see me at her feet; then, if she will forgive me, we will go away—away to Italy or some sunny place—together, alone with our love."

His valet scarcely knew his master, he seemed so happy and changed; he smiled and spoke cheerfully, and looked like a man who tasted joy after a long sorrow.

"It is a dark day, Mason," the earl said, as he opened his letters by the window.

"Yes, my lord; looks like a storm. I beg pardon, my lord, but I forgot: here is a note from my lady, your mother."

Roy took it and read it rapidly. "Lady Darrell is fatigued. I will go and see how she is. Send my letters

and newspapers down to the breakfast-table, Mason."

The earl left his room, and wended his way to his mother's apartment. She was still in bed.

"I am too tired to rise for breakfast, Roy," she said with a faint smile, as her son bent and kissed her white hand. "Had you not better go and ask your wife to take my place?"

Roy pressed his lips again to the slender fingers. "Mother," he whispered, passionately, "you see all."

"All," she answered gently. "I read it in your face last night. You love your wife, Roy; it is good and right, my dearest, that you should; I honor and respect the girl; she will make you a true wife, and a proud countess. She has been tried severely, but has come through the fire without a scar. You do love her, Roy?"

"Yes, mother, I do. I did not know how much till now, when I hear you praise her. I will go at once and give her your message. And this morning I want to write to Brown or his wife, to make enquiries about her birth; there is some mystery, I am sure. She is nobly born."

"I agree with you," Lady Darrell replied. "We must try and discover the truth now."

A sharp knock at the door disturbed them, and in answer to the summons Davis entered abruptly, with marks of agitation on her face.

"Oh, my lady—I beg your pardon, my lord; but I am so frightened I can't find the countess anywhere!"

"Can't find the countess?" exclaimed Lady Darrell, while Roy stood silent, grasping the bedpost.

"She is not in her room; the bed has not been slept in; her mantle and hat are gone; and I think she has left the Castle."

"She has gone for a walk," cried Roy, suddenly pushing aside the horrible pain that crowded his breast. "How can you be so absurd! The countess is in the grounds somewhere; she will be in directly. Don't you see how you have alarmed her ladyship?"

"My lord, I am very sorry," murmured Davis, her eyes full of tears, "but I feel somehow that my dear young mistress has gone. The room looks so strange; and why did she not sleep in the bed, my—"

"You are talking nonsense," Roy said roughly, scarce knowing what he said, the dread and fear that came at her first words almost suffocating him again.

"There is some mistake, Roy," Lady Darrell interrupted quietly. "Davis, send my maid to me; go back to your mistress's room, and wait for me there. Roy, go into my dressing-room. I will go and investigate this myself."

The earl strode into the other apartment, while Davis, white and nervous, went back to Alice's room.

In a very few minutes Lady Darrell called her son. She had wrapped a warm silk peignoir round her, and though her face was pale she smiled at him.

"She often rises and goes into the grounds, I know," she observed as she put her hand on her son's arm; "still it will satisfy Davis, perhaps, if we go and investigate matters."

The earl did not speak, but he pressed her hand gently, and they moved towards the young countess' apartments in silence.

Davis met them in the doorway, and Lady Darrell walked into the bedroom, while Roy remained just outside, his hand grasping the door post for support.

Could it be true? Was happiness to slip from him just as he had it in his hold?

His mother stood in the room and glanced around. She saw in an instant the maid was right.

The rich coverlet was undisturbed, the bedclothes were neat, there was a slight indentation on the pillow, but otherwise the bed bore no signs of being touched.

"Does your mistress ever sleep in the dressing-room?" she asked Davis in low tones.

The maid shook her head. "No, my lady?"

Roy now moved in slowly. "Well, mother?" he murmured. "I can't say anything, dearest," she answered. "You can see for yourself she has not slept here."

"What is the matter, dear Lady Darrell?" said Valerie, who entered at that moment. "Can I do anything? My maid told me you were—Roy, what is it?"

"My wife has gone," he said simply. "Gone! Oh, no, you must be mistaken; she is out for a walk. It is her custom to rise early, I know."

Valerie spoke cheerfully; she looked beautiful in her morning gown of grey, fitting her rounded form to perfection; there was a troubled expression on her face, but her eyes, beneath their deep lashes, glowed with excitement and joy.

"Search the other rooms," cried the

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