

# AWAKENED WOMAN

by ELINORE BARRY



First Installment

Even before she opened her eyes, Joyce was aware of being in a strange place. For the moment, however, she was still too drowsy to make any effort to move. A dull ache throbbled in her head. Her whole body felt heavy, weighed by an insistent lassitude.

Then other sensations asserted themselves. Her fingers, moving languidly, sent to her drowsy brain the message of some sort of cool silken material under their sensitive tips.

She kept her eyes shut while she tried to think things out. She remembered perfectly now. . . . She was in a taxi going to the Hotel Blackstone in Chicago. It was sleeting, and in the traffic another machine skidded suddenly and crashed into them.

And then they had brought her—where?

It didn't smell in the least like a hospital. And the bed was softer than any cot she had ever felt.

Suddenly she was afraid to open her eyes. Completely awake now, she lay tingling with curiosity, filled at the same time with a foreboding of some strange, frightening revelation to come.

Where could she be?

At last she could stand the uncertainty no longer. Without moving she opened her eyes and stared straight ahead of her. Her first look showed a cluster of large oranges hanging like golden balls in the sunshine against a background of cloudless blue sky.

Oranges! She had never seen oranges actually growing. Still without moving she rolled her eyes from one side to the other. They traveled up the bed to her hands, lying inert on the satin cover. Suddenly she became aware of three separate facts so startling in their significance that they set her heart to pumping and paralyzed her muscles.

She could never tell which shock was the first to register; the circle of tiny diamonds on the third finger of her left hand; the rumpled condition of the other side of the bed; or the cheerful masculine whistle coming from somewhere in the house close behind her!

A hot wave flooded her face and neck. But gradually her heart quieted down. She relaxed a trifle, breathed deeply, and tried to bring her whirling brain back to normal.

"It's the most incredible thing I ever . . . ever heard!" she thought desperately, fighting against a feeling of faintness. "It must be a dream! . . . I land in Chicago in November on a dark, cold, snowy afternoon; get in a taxi and . . . something bumps into the taxi and . . . I wake up the next morning and find that it's summertime, and that . . . I'm . . . I'm married! How could it have happened? How—?"

The whistle seemed to come a little nearer. Joyce clutched at the bedclothes in a suddenly renewed panic of terror. If it were not a dream now, this instant, then what had happened while she was unconscious?

Suddenly a telephone bell rang. The whistling stopped abruptly. She heard the click of the receiver being lifted . . . then "Yes?" in a deep, pleasant voice. She listened tensely.

"Oh, Laurine? Hello! . . . She's still asleep, I think. No. Doc says it's nothing serious, but it sure was lucky it wasn't worse. . . . Yes, you're absolutely right—What? . . . Well, I ask her last month not to ride that brute, but you know how she is . . . I'm leaving in a few minutes . . . Yes. Got to get to Chicago for a conference. . . . Come over sometime today and see

how she is, will you? I hate to go off like this but I'm just going to have time to make the date. It's something I can't sidestep. . . . Yeah? Well, tell Paul to be a good boy while I'm away. So long, Laurine. See you all in 'bout two or three weeks."

Click. Steps across the floor. The sound of steps approaching the bed sent her pulses hammering. Curiosity and fear mingled in her feeling as she looked up. She was so frightened that it did not occur to her to pretend to be asleep.

She saw a man of medium height . . . thirtyish . . . ruddy . . . blue eyes and blue tie . . . tan face and tan suit . . . light brown hair, combed back smoothly . . . face rather wide across the jaw . . . short nose . . . mouth cut in clean curves like a girl's. . . . Nothing villainous in the man's appearance.

"Hello, honey! How do you feel this morning?" He was smiling down at her with complete kindness.

Joyce swallowed hard, unable to answer. Under the sheet she clenched her hands trying to still the trembling of her body.

A worried look dimmed the smile on the man's face. He sat down on the side of the bed and leaned toward her, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"Why, what's the matter, dear? Head pretty bad? Oh, I say, did I hurt you? You poor kid!"

He drew back a little. Joyce had involuntarily flinched when his hands touched her.

The thought flashed into Joyce's confused mind that if he fancied she were really ill, he might after all not go away. And she must have time to recover from the shock and decide what to do. She must be left alone. She would have to speak; everything depended on her making this effort.

"Oh, I'm . . . I'm all right," she stammered hardly above a whisper.

A look of relief came into the face above her. "Whew, but you gave me a scare. Frills," he exclaimed. "Sure you're all right? Doc's coming over to take another look at you. Better stay in bed and get a rest. If you're all right, I've got to dash to the city to get my train for Chicago. But I won't go if you're not. You don't seem just right."

"Oh, no, really, I'm all right," she said hastily. "I have a headache. It'll be all right."

"You're sure? . . . Good! . . . Well, good-bye, honey. Take care of yourself. You can always reach me at the Blackstone, you know. I'll expect to hear from you."

He leaned over, took her face between his large firm hands and kissed her. After he had kissed her twice, while Joyce tried furiously to recall the blush she felt burning her face, he added, hesitatingly, "Look here, Frills, I wish you'd . . . go a little easy while I'm away, will you. I'll be worried about you all the time if I think you're . . . pulling any more reckless stunts, you know. And—"

"Oh, no, don't worry about me!" interrupted Joyce, wishing he would stop kissing her and go away, "I won't do a thing, I . . . I know I'm going to feel like being very quiet for . . . for awhile."

This sort of answer was evidently unexpected, Joyce decided, when she saw the surprise in his face mingled with relief. In speaking before, his voice had revealed a note of apprehension, as if he were afraid of the way his words would be received. "What sort of disposition can I have had?" she wondered.

"Well, good-bye, honey," he said once more, and kissing her again, he stood up, "I've got to hop off, I'll wire today from somewhere along the line."

Joyce lay and listened to his steps receding inside the house. Then she drew a long breath and sat up suddenly. "So, that's my . . . my husband. He has a very nice voice, and I don't feel exactly afraid of him. I think he's got a—kind, pleasant look on his face. . . ."

Her thoughts paused in confusion. What did it mean?

Gradually her sense of dizzy panic gave way to puzzled curiosity. Lying there in the sweet scented sunshine her mind grew clearer and she tried to fathom the situation unemotionally. But it was

no use; the pieces didn't fit; she had nothing to go on. . . .

Swinging her feet over the side of the bed, she found a pair of high-heeled satin bedroom slippers which she put on, and then stood up and stretched cautiously. She felt somewhat stiff and lame, especially all down the side, shoulder, elbow and knee.

"Ouch! That must be the side I fell on. To think that I always wanted to learn to ride horseback and now I've done it and had a bad fall besides—and I don't know a thing about it!"

She went over to the big window of the sleeping porch and stood for a few moments in the warm sunshine, gazing out eagerly. Beneath her lay a terraced garden, full of a blaze of flowers. A high hedge surrounded the garden, down one side of which grew a row of slender Italian cypresses, stiff and dark and theatrical looking. Beyond the hedge stretched a huge orchard of fruit trees. Joyce stared down at it in amazement. She had never seen such an enormous orchard in her life. The rows of white-blossomed trees seemed to run out for miles and miles over a flat valley, like a drift of snow across a huge plain. Along the farther horizon undulated a line of strange, pucker treeless hills against the sky. As her glance followed them to the right, she saw that beyond the low hills rose high mountains.

She turned reluctantly away from the view of the sunny garden and the open country, and entered the house. She found a large bedroom with flowers cretonne curtains and cushions . . . ivory-wicker furniture . . . a little pile of silk underclothes at the foot of the big smooth bed . . . luxurious dressing table with a low set in front of it . . . a partly-open door at the right giving a glimpse into a closet full of clothes . . . at the left a wide-open door into a spacious white tiled bathroom."

Suddenly, as she stood motionless on the threshold, feeling like an intruder entering some one else's bedroom, she caught sight of a girl with short wavy hair, clad in a delectable mauve pajama suit. With a gasp of surprise she raised it was her own image reflected in one of the two full length mirrors which flanked the dressing table.

"Well! . . ." She moved hastily up close to the mirror and examined herself with interest. Fascinated, she examined her face more closely and smiled suddenly with pleased surprise at the image in the glass. "You look really a whole lot . . . prettier than you ever did in Philadelphia, I must admit! The bathroom was another exciting discovery. It was a large, square room, elaborately tiled, with magnificent fittings and fixtures. Joyce gaped with pleasure as she looked.

Through the big open window at the left, the sun was streaming in, bringing with it that indescribably sweet odor which had greeted Joyce on her waking. Part of it must come from those acres of trees in bloom beyond the garden, part of it from the waxen blossoms of the orange tree.

In spite of the mystery, in spite of the complications she was about to meet, it was impossible, after a two-year-long diet of Mrs. Lowrie's boarding house, for Joyce not to feel a thrill of pleasure at finding herself in these lovely surroundings. With a little hop of sheer excitement, she crossed the big bathroom and pushed open another door which she noticed stood just slightly ajar.

"Oh? His . . . his dressing room, I suppose," she murmured, hesitating on the threshold. She entered shyly, crossed to the dresser, and took from it a large photograph in a heavy silver frame. Her own face smiled out at her.

It was her own; but Joyce felt, nevertheless, that she must be looking at her double. "Of course, it's retouched a lot, and the shorn hair and the pearls and the evening gown made a difference. But I . . . don't know . . . there's something so assured and sophisticated and daring about it that it doesn't look like me, not like Joyce Ashton."

Continued next week.

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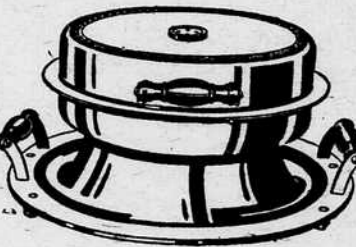
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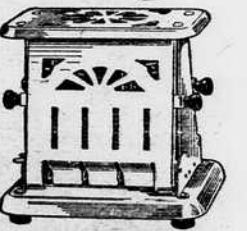
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