

AWAKENED WOMAN

by Elinore Barry

Sixteenth Installment

"Do you know, dear, I haven't had a ride with you in a dog's age. I think I'll cut out the golf today and go with you. Take me on, will you?" Neil spoke with smiling carelessness but the look in his eyes gave him away.

"Of course, what time will you get here?" She spoke casually. Neil would never guess the turmoil of unhappiness under that calm. Did men ever divine things the way women did? One man perhaps . . . Robert? as the name stabbed her she turned away quickly, scarcely hearing Neil's answer, "I'll come home to lunch, I think. Then we'll have the whole afternoon together."

Even in her pain Joyce heard the change in Neil's voice. That last word was spoken with so touchingly confident and happy a note. "All right, I'll be ready. Good-bye," and she ran upstairs and shut herself in her room. There she sat on the edge of the couch-bed and clenched her hands, staring dry-eyed out of the big window to the distant mountains.

Joyce was wrapped in a mood of warm compassion for Neil. She felt she could not add another unkindness to the many that Frills had inflicted upon him. His eyes haunted her, and she felt more utterly miserable than she had at any time since she had awakened to find herself occupying another woman's shoes. She could not contemplate failing Neil and his mother that way.

Riding off with Joyce that afternoon, Neil was in high spirits, with an elation in his manner that filled Joyce with shame. She rode in silence, hardly answering his questions, and not looking at him.

Neil soon fell in with her mood as they rode along and no longer bothered her with conversation. Gradually then she began to feel remorse, and wished she could be less surly with Neil. He tried so hard to please her in everything, to adapt himself to her moods. It struck Joyce suddenly how much of that sort of thing he must have been doing in his married life.

"Sam says McBready has a new lot of horses in," remarked Joyce, "did he tell you there's a man from Salinas who would like to buy Fire Queen?"

"Yeah," replied Neil, eyeing her sidewise, perhaps to see if her general expression matched the friendly casualness of her voice. "I said I'd like to get rid of her myself but I'd have to consult you about the matter. I hate the sight of the damn brute after what she nearly did to you, dear."

A flash of amusement curled the corners of Joyce's mouth for a moment as she remarked, "You needn't consult me. I'm quite satisfied with Rosita, thank you."

"Really? Gosh that's great. Sure relieves my mind."

A little later they dismounted and sat down on a slope overlooking the valley to eat the package of sandwiches and fruit Joyce had brought. To her relief Neil talked about Manzanita topics: his mother's condition, Paul's departure, Sam's progress in the correspondence course, plans for the new subdivision north of Manzanita, and so on.

He finally stretched out on the ground and put his head in her lap. Joyce had just stroked back a lock of hair from his forehead, thinking absently that Neil ought to be doing something about the increasing thinness of his hair, when the thud of a horse's hoofs in the distance caught her ear. She stiffened and glanced up with an apprehensive fear clutching at her heart and stopping its beat for a moment.

There, in an opening between clumps of oak trees about sixty yards away, on the trail they had just left, rode Robert Ainsworth! He did not see her at first. Then his idly roving glance turned to the couple on the ground. His eyes met Joyce's, and a quick smile of recognition spread over his face. Then his look dropped to the figure of Neil lying with his head in her lap. A quizzical shade passed over his face.

"Hello, Joyce" he shouted. His horse leaped forward under the spur of his heel, and they galloped up the slope. Before Neil could stumble to his feet Ainsworth was drawing rein nearly upon them. "This precise situation," he said easily, "demands a galloping retreat on my part, but I'm too inquisitive

to be so gallant. I prefer to advance and see what happens instead!" Joyce's self-possession left her entirely. She stared numbly at the two men, miserably aware that they were both looking to her for explanation, and even more miserably aware that she knew not how to begin.

Neil was the first to come to Joyce's rescue. "I beg your pardon," he said, courteously, "you seem to know my wife?" The quizzical smile deepened on Robert's face. "No, I seem rather to have made a mistake—" he began. A new, almost insolent note in his voice whipped Joyce into anger. All at once she knew what her course must be. It mattered little to her what the outcome of this meeting was; she was determined not to be led into further deceptions.

"No mistake at all," she said quietly. "Neil, he's lying if he says he doesn't know me—"

She looked from one to the other of the men. Neil's expression was that of the same partly-repressed hurt that he had shown when Maitland's name had been mentioned. She knew at once that he thought Robert had taken Maitland's place in Frills' life, but that his value of decency and dignity was holding him in check. Neil's immediate unconscious reaction to this situation did not surprise her; he was showing no reversal of his personality.

Robert, however, had suddenly become a stranger to her. Was this her "perfect companion," was this the man whose subtlety and sympathy she had so deliriously counted on? He sat on his horse coolly and looked down on them with an expression of amused cynicism. If this attitude were a cloak

it so difficult for me! I want to tell both of you the truth!"

She turned to her husband, "Neil you never heard of Joyce Ashton, did you? Answer me that, Neil?" "You don't mean Joyce Abbot, do you Frills?"

"No, no, I don't . . . Tell me this, Neil, what was my name before you married me? . . . Don't look at me as if I were crazy! What was my name before you married me?"

"Why, Frills, this is nonsense! Don't you know your own name? It was Florence Hilton, of course. What's that go to do—"

"Oh, will you please let me tell you? Sit down, both of you, this is going to take a long time. Please don't begin by thinking I'm crazy. You've both heard of amnesia victims, of course? Did you know you'd married one, Neil? Did you know that Florence Hilton was a girl without a past, without a life? You've got to help me tell this story, Neil, because I remember nothing before the morning after Fire Queen threw me on my head!"

Neil was staring at her dumb-founded. "You're not serious, Frills? Why—what—when—"

Robert Ainsworth said, "Lord! Tell us what you're driving at, Joyce!"

Joyce suddenly found it possible to talk to these two men. It was as if her mind had for some time been preparing the story it had to tell, so that the words came swiftly, tensely, dramatically. She told them of being born Joyce Ashton, of her early life in New England, of her aunt and uncle, of her work in Philadelphia and then of her start toward the Coast in search of adventure.

"I remember getting into the

reckless, less troublesome generally, than the Frills you married?"
Continued next week.

PIG ESCAPES 'CHUTE DROP
Baltimore.—The scheduled leap of a pig from an airplane at a fair staged for the benefit of the Protestant Episcopal church of the Good Shepherd was not held. In its place, link sausage attached to a parachute was dropped. The Cruelty to Animals had protested the parachute jump of the pig.

—Buy In Salisbury—

STEEL OPERATIONS ADVANCE
Cleveland.—The Magazine Steel said operations in the industry last week advanced one point to 49 per cent of capacity and forecasts that production this week would be at 50 per cent. Tin plate activities were placed at between 90 and 95 per cent.

SALES OF LEAD INCREASE
Chicago.—Edward J. Cornish, chairman of the board of the National Lead company, announced sales in May were 50 per cent ahead of the average during the first three months of the year.

HELD FOR MURDER
Blume Weddington, 27, Concord, is held under \$5,000 bond for the shooting and killing of Joe Apperson, 33. Weddington claims Apperson had broken up his home and that he shot in self-defense.

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Please, please, don't begin to fight.

for his hurt feelings, Joyce thought swiftly, it was a less lovely one than Neil's!

These valuations passed through Joyce's mind in one galloping second. While she stood there helplessly, wondering where to begin.

"May I have the pleasure of meeting your husband?" Robert asked, smiling.

Joyce looked at him. "Get off your horse, please," she answered, "there's a lot to be straightened out and it'll take some time. . . . Robert Ainsworth, this is Neil Packard, my husband . . ."

The men acknowledged the introduction, Neil curtly, Robert with the same hard amusement that so offended Joyce.

"Charmed," said Ainsworth lightly.

"Oh, don't talk that way!" Joyce cried. "I don't know you at all in this mood—you're making it terribly hard for me—"

Robert threw back his head and laughed. "Think, Joyce, what a lot I'm going to learn from this meeting! Think of the value of it all to a novelist! Why, I wouldn't be missing it for anything! I only wish I had the pen of an Elinor Glyn to write it up adequately—"

Neil drew forward. "I don't think my wife and I have time to stop and listen to that sort of damn' drivel from you—" he began hotly, when Joyce interposed.

"Oh, this is all so fantastic! Please, please, don't begin a fight

over it, when neither of you really knows a bit what it's all about . . . Neil, I've been trying to make up my mind to tell you—Robert, there's a good deal due to you, too! I hadn't expected to tell you both at once, but since it's happened this way, for Heaven's sake don't make

taxicab in Chicago in the snow—that sort of light snow when the streets still aren't quite wet, but the dirt makes them sticky. The taxi skidded violently—there was a crash—and when I woke up I was in a bed, on a sleeping porch, looking out at a tree on which oranges were growing. A man came onto the porch and asked me how I felt! That was you, Neil, whom I in my first appalled state fancied to have been my kidnapper!"

"Why on earth—say, how on earth have you kept this all to yourself? How long ago was all this, Joyce?" It was Ainsworth speaking. Neil seemed to stunned to take in the significance of it all.

"I don't know just how I have kept it all. Of course at first I was so terrified I couldn't think, much less act. Then I've always been awfully reticent—hated scenes—and I usually followed the line of least resistance. Neil was just leaving to go on a business trip to Chicago. He kissed me good-bye while I was still in that paralyzed state, and I was left to figure things out for myself! It was all terrible, of course, but in some ways it was fascinating. Your house, Neil, is so lovely, and the outdooriness appealed to me—it all was so different from the pinched, dark, meagre life I'd been leading in the Philadelphia boarding-house that I hung greedily on. . . . And then, of course, I found out about Frills. . . ."

"Frills was the vicious imp that had taken possession of my body while I was an amnesia victim. I found out that as well as having gotten Joyce Ashton a good husband and a beautiful home, she had made that husband desperately unhappy, been a cross little beast."

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