

AWAKENED WOMAN

ELINORE BARRY



FIFTEENTH INSTALLMENT

Ainsworth lifted his head, put the hand under her chin and stared down into her face. Joyce's whirl of happiness filled her so full of emotion that she could not hold it all and a little of it spilled over in tears. Her heart beat in rapid accord with the violent beats which she could plainly feel thumping in Robert Ainsworth's breast. He bent down then and kissed her eyes and her lips. At first, just lightly, almost in playful caress; but again and again, and each time a little harder, a little more intensely—until finally, his mouth crushed down on hers and it was as if she were lifted out of herself and had lost her identity.

After a few moments he released her abruptly. Joyce, so weak, she had to lean against the bookshelves to keep herself from falling, watched Ainsworth walk to the door and stand there with his back to her. She could not speak. It seemed to her that they stood thus for an eternity.

Finally he turned around and smiled at her again. "Well, there it is. And what happens next? Does the Beautiful Belinda depart forever in proud wrath and leave the poor insulting worm to live on with only the memory of his daring deed or . . . Leaving his sentence unfinished, he took a cigarette and lighted it. Joyce watching, saw his hand shake as he held the match to the tip.

Why he did not come back to her and take her in his arms again? Why did he not tell her he loved her? She had not regaled him.

"Dickie," went on Ainsworth, sitting down on the step and picking up the dog who was nudging at him for attention, "it should be possible, one would think, for a sweet, beautiful girl to visit a man, even in a lonely place like this without being . . . or . . . manhandled." He smoked furiously. Joyce, feeling her knees trembling, sat down on the arm of one of the big redwood chairs and listened silently.

"But, you see, Dickie, damn it, I've been living here all alone for months and months, and a man gets to fooling himself with his smart delusion that he's self-sufficient, that the lid is on good and tight—until, suddenly, along comes a girl, not just an ordinary girl, you know, Dickie, but one with sweetness and beauty and intelligence, one who is a peculiar joy to be with, and—well, then, bang, everything is off!"

A chill descended on Joyce. She felt a vast sickening fear settle down beaming over her. What did he mean? Did he—was he sorry for what had happened? A flame of white humiliation burned Joyce with intolerable pain. She must get away quickly and hide herself from this thought.

She stood up and tried to speak in a casual, ordinary voice. "I think, Dickie, it's time for us . . . to go."

Ainsworth jumped to his feet, dropping Dickie unceremoniously and came to her. "Look here, Joyce! Don't go. You're—oh what shall I say?" He took her in his arms and kissed her again and again. Then he looked into her eyes, met her anxious smile and said softly, "Oh, what is there to talk about? We don't need any words, do we, darling?"

Joyce shook her head without speaking. She was swept back again to the heights of joyous happiness and she clung to him now unquestioning.

At last, however, she drew herself away and stood up, straightening her silk blouse with nervous hands and hastily combing her hair, which Ainsworth's caresses had ruffled. As she stood in front of the mirror, he came up behind her and put his arms gently around her body again. His eyes met hers in the glass. He was so much taller than Joyce that his chin rested on the top of her curly yellow head. She leaned back against him, suddenly aware of the fact that she was almost limp with fatigue after the emotional storm she had passed through, and smiled into the mirror. At that he whirled her around and crushing her to him again buried his face in her neck. "Oh, . . . dearest . . . most beautiful . . ."

She put her arms around his shoulders and whispered shyly, "Oh, am I all that . . . to you?"

"And so much more that I can't put into words!" he murmured, kissing the tip of her ear.

After a while Joyce was able to put on her hat and then, with his arm around her, they set out to walk to the car through the woods.

After she was in the car, with Dickie on the seat beside her, Ainsworth leaned against it with his arms still around her and

gave her a final kiss.

"Can't I do the calling next time? We've got some serious talking to do about this situation of ours. Tell me where this mysterious aunt of yours lives!"

Joyce dropped her eyes suddenly. "Oh—please let's leave things as they are!"

All at once she realized the ambiguousness of her position. "I'll come again in a day or two."

She was thankful for the unconventional slant that made him answer cheerfully. "Oh, all right. I have to go up to the city for a day or two. I think it's next Tuesday."

"Oh no, don't . . . don't stay away long," begged Joyce.

"But you'll come before I go? Good Lord, it's four whole days till then."

Even though she knew it was late, Joyce drove home slowly.

It was maddening to have to go out to dinner at the Carter's. It was to be a more or less formal affair followed by a "theatre party."

Both Mr. and Mrs. Carter were devoted to Neil, but their aversion to Frills was only thinly veiled.

When she was ready to go, Joyce sat at her dressing table and stared dreamily at herself, wondering what Robert would think of her now.

"You're looking stunning tonight, Frills!" Neil had come up behind her and interrupted her dreaming.

Joyce started at his words and blushed at being caught so obviously admiring herself, partly with annoyance at being forced to a realization of Neil's right to so address her. She jumped up and went to the closet to get her evening cloak, remarking casually in a voice of which she tried to keep out all trace of her nervous irritation. "Thanks for the compliment, but the credit is really yours. It's a lovely dress but I couldn't have had it if you weren't such a generous provider, my dear Mr. Packard."

Neil took from her the luxurious cape of sea-green transparent velvet, and they went downstairs together. "By the way, mother telephoned me a dittle while ago," he said, "the doctor has ordered her to stay in bed a few days and she wondered if you would come tomorrow afternoon and sit with her for a while? She's missed you lately . . . and . . . you know . . . and she's so happy at the way you've been to her . . . I'm worried," he went on, as he laid the lovely cloak about her shoulders and for a moment held her to him, "there's something wrong about it I wish I knew what to do."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," exclaimed Joyce. "I'll go tomorrow and spend the afternoon with her. I've . . . I know I've neglected her lately."

"Darling, that's sweet of you. I wish . . . I wonder . . . Frills, what the devil can I do to . . . win you back? Isn't there any chance for me?"

"Oh, please, Neil, don't!" cried Joyce, "don't start that again. Come on, we'll be late and you know Mrs. Carter likes to begin on time when she's giving a theatre party afterwards."

Most parties in Manzanita had a way of splitting up into couples, and Joyce found herself taken in charge by her dinner partner when they afterwards set out for the theatre. This happened to be Paul Packard, much to her satisfaction, for his company made it possible to sit without talking during the picture. Joyce deliberately shut her eyes to the sartorial allurements of the picture and returned in spirit to the little shack on the lonely hillside.

Before the next afternoon she was torn by such longing to see Robert that she set out for Neil's mother's house in dragging rebellion. Even Mrs. Packard's gentleness and pleasure failed wholly to rout her constant sense of frustration.

"I wonder whether something is going wrong in the business," Mrs. Packard remarked in the course of the afternoon. "Neil hasn't been himself lately."

"I don't know," replied Joyce, "he hasn't said anything to me and I think the business is all right." She knew only too well what was the cause of Neil's depression but she could not tell his mother.

"Please don't worry about Neil too much," she said gently, "I feel sure this is just a temporary thing. There may be some business deal in the air that Neil is brooding over a little. He'll come out all right."

Mrs. Packard looked as if she were grateful for Joyce's effort to relieve her mind but not wholly convinced that the matter was so simple as it sounded.

When Neil arrived, Joyce insisted on their leaving shortly after. All the way home she could not get out of her mind that one significant moment when the pinched grayness of Mrs. Packard's face

had struck her.

"Mother sure looked tired, didn't she?" remarked Neil as they drove

home. "How was she during the afternoon? Did she talk much?"

"A little less than usual, I think. It seemed to exhaust her. Neil, she's worrying about you. She thinks something is . . ."

They were both silent. Joyce did not dare ask what it was that was troubling him because she felt so sure she knew.

Joyce lay awake a long time that night seeing the situation with an appalling clearness, from every point of view. "I was ready enough to condemn Frills for treating Neil the way she did. I was disgusted at her for having an affair with

with Matilda. And now, just because Robert Ainsworth seems to me to be worth a million Arthur Matilda, it doesn't make any real difference. If I deceive Neil that way, I'm hurting him, too, and I'm no better than Frills was. And . . . Oh, I feel like a miserable worm to be taking all this luxury and love without doing anything to deserve it, even using it to . . . to hurt Neil so terribly. If only he didn't love me so much. And he was so happy for a while. It was almost pitiful how grateful he was for so little. Oh, I can't bear to . . . to think of it even."

Joyce buried her face in the pillow and tried to stifle the sobs which shook her.

At breakfast the next morning Neil glanced at her and said, frowning anxiously, "Didn't you sleep, Frills? You look kind of pale and dragged out this morning, dear."

Joyce's nerves were on edge after her stormy night and Neil's concerned tone struck her almost like a blow. To her horror she felt her eyes fill with a quick rush of tears. The worried look on his face deepened. "Why, sweetheart, what's the matter? Aren't

you well? Does your head ache? Why didn't you stay in bed?"

But Joyce swallowed the lump in her throat and summoning all her self-control she answered quickly, "Oh, I'll be all right. I just didn't sleep very well."

"Well, you'd better take a nap today sometime. What are you doing, any thing special?" he went on.

"No, I . . . guess not. I'm going to run out to your mother's for a few minutes about noon and take her some magazines and books. I may ride this afternoon."

(Continued Next Week)

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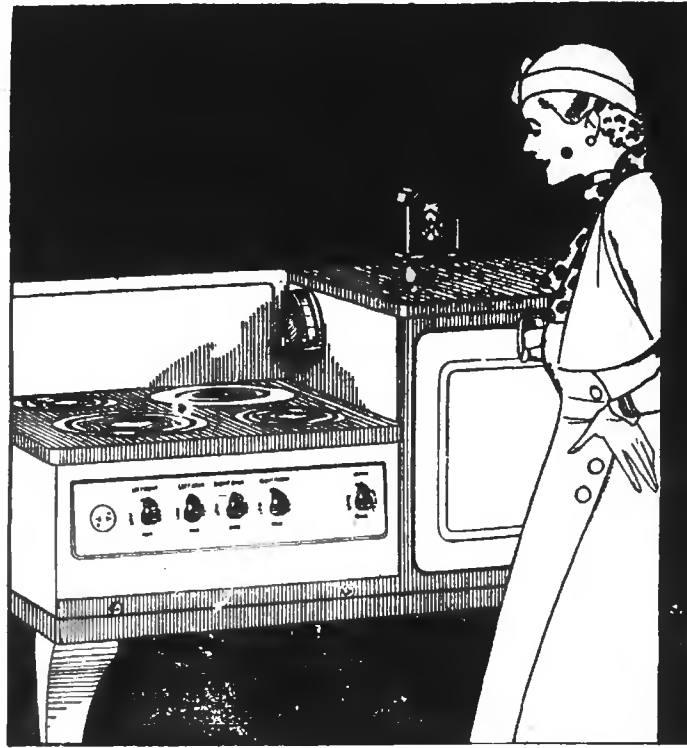
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