

A Common Story Seldom Told

May Huntley

1895

Two women sat in the dusk of a summer evening, where the glow from a western window fell on their faces, and the one star showing in the purplish radiance, looked in upon them sympathetically. Their voices were low and even—as voices grow in the hush of twilight when one revels in the “sweetness of doing nothing and confidences are so easy.”

“There is something incongruous in hearing such words from your lips,” said the younger, a dark-eyed, stately woman whom others called haughty, but who was sweetness itself to the quiet, gentle lady at her side. “One expects to hear an angular female, with sharp features and a strident voice uttering such sentiments—if they must be uttered—but not a cultivated, wise and lady-like little person like yourself. It sounds like cant to me—trite and worn phrases that have no foundation in truth: “Tyranny of man,” “the slavery of wifehood,” “woman’s sexual bondage,” etc., why do *you* use such terms? Why do you believe such things exist? They have grown tiresome used on the rostrum and in “Woman” articles—in good society they are out of place. You certainly should take broader views of life.”

“I know what does exist, Helen. I have had a wider experience than you, and I have lived longer. There are some things that, however trite and tiresome they become, must be said over and over again, until they have an effect.”

“But surely there is no need of such things being said. Where *are* the tyrant husbands, the abused wives, the miserable bondage you speak of? Not among educated and refined people, certainly. The ignorant and brutish will abuse each other, I suppose, but as often as not the man gets the worst of it. Gentlemen do not misuse their wives and I have little sympathy with women who would marry any but gentlemen.”

“You speak from a limited experience. Your life has been a peculiar one. Your first husband was a scholar whose strength lay in his intellect; whose nature was cool and calm, and he died early. Circumstances have kept you much apart from your present husband—you cannot realize the depth of meaning that lies in these “trite phrases.” Your friends do not confide secret sorrows to you, how should you know? But under all this cant of “man’s tyranny” and “woman’s bondage” a real truth is concealed and few recognize its existence or its importance. It is comprehended in one definite fact. Nature, civilization, the institutions of society, have made this one species of bondage possible—nay, respectable and imperative. The conventional woman is chaste and cold—the product of the ages. Yet she is “faithful” and dutiful. If to be dispassionate is her pride, and to be called a slave is her scorn, how shall we explain the fact that her husband is satisfied

with her? Something is yielded, something demanded, and the demand and submission have gone on so long, and so quietly, that for all the pitiful, disastrous consequences to the human race, nothing but a natural condition is recognised, and he who whispers of the horror of it all, is condemned—not the condition.”

“But surely these horrors are imaginary. The relationship between husbands and wives is mutual. Respectable people do not make unreasonable demands on each other surely. Among refined, well taught people, man’s power to exercise this peculiar kind of tyranny is never put in practice—gentlemen do not make themselves obnoxiously intrusive, I am certain.”

“My dear friend, the “duty of wives” and the “physical needs of man” are so generally recognized that the exercise of this peculiar kind of tyranny goes on without notice; there are no loud outcries, no rebellions, no sensational disclosures. The physician is the only father confessor; the secrets of the inner temple of home, are more sacred than those of the cloister. But if woman is to-day sickly, inferior, emotional, unstable, it is because of centuries of this same unconsidered, sacred submission and dominance.

“But there are many happy women. Women who apparently twist their husbands around their little fingers. I cannot believe such submission common.”

“Women have learned to make weapons of their chains and often they are so gilded and so light that she even is not conscious of them. You remember the “Woman Who Dares?” It was long until she felt its restraint; but the time came when she pulled the wrong way, and the links tightened as firmly as ever they had on the neck of the stupid wife of an ignorant lout. A woman may be a pet for years; then a moment comes when she tires of that vocation and tries to be something else. Suddenly she realizes she is not free to be anything else. Her struggles only bruise and hurt her. Quiet, she does not feel chains; aroused, she but beats and injures herself—and learns there is no hope within the gilded bars.”

“But what can you know of such things? You, whose husband was genial, kind-hearted, tender, Jack Kirwin? I can remember him when I was a little girl—he was my ideal of every- thing that was manly and good.”

“I have only tender memories of Jack in our first years together. Younger, and before he learned wisdom he was—well, like other men. We suffered and grew wise by experience. I never recall that early time in our lives—”the honeymoon”—the days supposed to be steeped in ecstatic bliss—never, if I can avoid it. But to illustrate a truth I will—for your sake. You know I was but sixteen when I was married. I liked my handsome young lover, felt a childish pride in his beauty and strength, and was innocently happy in thinking he would always be near me to praise me and do as I liked. But I felt nothing of a mature woman’s deep and passionate love, and I had not the slightest gleam of the meaning of marriage in its practical sense.

“I remember my wedding night so well. The day had been a long and happy one and loving friends had surrounded me with smiles and caresses that gave me no hint of the life to come. At last I was alone—alone in the room which was henceforth to be, not mine, but ours. I stood before the glass and looked at the blushing, happy face reflected there; my wedding dress slipped from my shoulders and I thought how white and pretty they were, and if Jack—and then I knew he had entered. But he stood silently near the door and I shyly refused to look around. I knew he was gazing at me and I wondered if he thought I was pretty; and after a moment, as I heard him step toward me, I peeped through the tresses of hair, that had fallen over my eyes. And I saw—not the tender, reverential gaze of a *gentleman*, but the wild, eager glare of an unchained animal. Then he rushed swiftly toward me and rushed me in a wild, terrible embrace.

“Ah! you are mine at last! My *own*.” Not tender and sweet and caressing was the exclamation—rather it was ghoul-like. I tried to push him away. “Jack, Jack!—you frighten me! Don’t be so rough. Sit down and take me in your arms gently, as you did last evening, and let me talk to you.” These were my last coherent words that night. My lover, my gentlemanly lover was gone. All that can be known to wife or woman was thrust suddenly upon my innocent childish soul. The revelations bursting unheralded upon my simple nature stunned,—froze me into speechlessness. I could not recognize my lover in the demon who held me in his grasp and at his mercy. Shocked, horrified, tortured—I could only think one thing clearly; that if I lived to escape I would never look upon his face again. I hated the people who *must have known*, and yet shut me up for a whole night with this dreadful being.

I aroused from a benumbing terror only when the gray morning dawned and he had fallen into an exhausted slumber. Then I quietly arose, dressed and stole out of the room. I walked ten miles that morning and fell fainting in a friend’s arms before noon.”

“Did he come for you?”

The soft tones were not resumed for some moments. “Oh it was a sorrowful time. Of course there was a sensation, and I was blamed and scolded. But then, I was very ill for a long while and people forgave me. And I was taught a new lesson, and my eyes were opened to what exists in the lives of most women. And he “forgave” me at last for bringing shame and ridicule upon him, and we lived together. But I was unhappy and he was impatient. I wanted him to think well of me and I tried to please him. But he was no happier with the toy he had ruined at the first grasp than was I. He was disappointed—irritable. And it was not until after a long separation, when we both studied and thought, and I recovered my health, that we learned how to live united, to respect each other, and to lead passion into the white light of reason. Many never learn and are all their lives unhappy.”

“I understand”—and in the gathering darkness the faces gleamed out very white and still.

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