

OUR WEEKLY SERIAL STORY INSTALLMENT

CRUCIBLE

By
BEN AMES WILLIAMS

© Ben Ames Williams.

CHAPTER IX
—19—

A strange thing, long in preparation, happened next day to Mrs. Sentry. She might, she thought afterward, have guessed what was to come; might have foreseen it. But she did not. Obedient to her promise to Falkran, she went to the prison to see her husband. She had been awake most of the night, yet she rose in the morning in an almost peaceful mind, and when she met Mr. Sentry it was composedly. They spoke commonplaces for a while, till she said at last, her tone curiously gentle:

"My testimony will follow yours, Arthur."

His eyes suddenly widened, as though under the shock of an actual blow. "You! You're going to testify?"

"I must tell them you had no cause to fear me."

He cried passionately: "Oh, don't, Ellen! It's bad enough for me. Falkran can't ask you to do that."

She reminded him gravely: "It is true, you know! When you came to me, long ago—" And she said, almost contritely: "I might have been more generous than I was; but—I was young then, not so wise as I am now. I gave you what I could—and I've never been sorry. Only, I am sorry now it was not more."

He said hopelessly: "Falkran insisted that I must—say those things, Ellen. But not you! Please don't! I—can't command; but I beg you—" And he said in a low tone: "I was crazy last summer, Ellen! I must have been. But there had never been any other—if you can believe me."

She started to say steadily that of course she believed him; and she was astonished to find that she could not speak. Her throat was full. She rose in a sort of panic, fighting for words. And suddenly pain seized her every part, every fiber, bone and blood, muscle and sinew, nerve and brain. She was a burning torch of pain!

For something in him, in his word, in his tone, had, incredibly, waked something long asleep in her. She stood above him, leaning down, racked and shaken not for herself but for him, yearning over him, yearning to protect him, yearning to hold him close and hard. She fought to speak; she muttered, "Arthur—"

Then the guard touched her arm warningly. She realized that the man had spoken, even though she had not heard. And she felt her cheek burn bright; and she thought, bewildered, still unbelieving:

"I love him! Why—I love him!"

Obedying the officer she went toward the door; yet from the door looked back. Arthur was on his feet, pale, wondering.

She smiled at him richly. She went out and away, and felt herself torn in two parts by this separation from him.

The thought that Arthur had been loyal to her through twenty barren years filled her with a clamorous grief, a hopeless despair. She might have given so much, and had so much bliss in that surrender; might have forgotten the pride she had nursed with such blind tenacity, and been herself the richer for forgetting.

In court Monday morning she found that now she could be hurt and feel the pain. When the Assistant District Attorney, Mr. Weldon, began the questioning, she understood that Bob Flood had delegated this duty because Arthur had been his friend. Mr. Weldon was a swart young man with thin lips and a lean pointed jaw that thrust forward like a challenging finger. He began so quietly.

"Now Mr. Sentry, you told the Court on Saturday that you killed Miss Wines?"

"By accident, yes, sir."

"But the gun was in your hand?"

"Yes."

"You had cocked it?"

"Yes."

"You pulled the trigger?"
"It jarred off."
"Oh, it jarred off? I see. Is this the gun?"
"Yes."

"Cock it, please. Now, without putting your finger on the trigger, pound it on the railing of the witness box till it jars off. It is not loaded."

Mrs. Sentry would always remember Arthur, pounding the gun butt on the rail of the witness stand for a long time, harder and harder, bruising his hand, perspiring. An interminable time, with Mr. Weldon asking: "Has it gone off yet? Try again."

Till finally, relenting, taking the gun from Arthur's hand, he said, still gently: "Now Mr. Sentry, your hand is bruised, your knuckles bleeding, you have pounded it as hard as you can, but it has not gone off?"

"No."

"Then perhaps you did pull the trigger that night?"

"I must have! Accidentally!"

"So you loaded the gun and cocked it and pulled the trigger and killed Miss Wines?"

Arthur said: "I suppose so." He was wiping his knuckles with his handkerchief. Mrs. Sentry could see small red spots upon the linen, thought he should use iodine lest the wounds become infected.

She heard Weldon say: "So Miss Wines came to you for help or money or advice, three weeks before you shot her, and you sent her away?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Sentry sometimes, in her charitable work, helped unfortunate young girls, did she not?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you send Miss Wines to Mrs. Sentry before you shot her?"

"It did not occur to me to do so."

"Did it occur to you that if you did so, Mrs. Sentry might misinterpret your interest in Miss Wines?"

"No. Mrs. Sentry would have known that if there had been anything between Miss Wines and me, I would have told her."

Mrs. Sentry looked straight ahead, proudly, her head high. She felt all the staring eyes that turned toward her like the points of lances, from every side.

"So you refused to help Miss Wines before you shot her?"

"Yes."

"I was afraid—"

"Oh, yes. I remember, you told us. You're a very fearful man, are you not? Just as Uriah Heep was a very 'umble man? Are you also a humble man, Mr. Sentry?"

"Not particularly."

"On the contrary, you're rather proud, aren't you?"

"No."

"Aren't you proud of your honorable ancestry?"

"Well, yes."

"Of your old established business?"

"Yes."

"Of your personal success, your social standing?"

"Yes."

"Of your family?"

"Yes."

"And yet you say you're not proud?"

"In that sense I suppose I am."

"In what sense are you not, Mr. Sentry?"

"Well—haughty."

"Oh, you're not haughty?"

"No."

Mr. Weldon nodded. "Now you said a while ago that you were afraid; and that because you were afraid, you did not help Miss Wines before you shot her."

"Yes."

"Were you responsible for the fact that she so desperately needed help from someone?"

"No."

"But even though you were innocent, you were afraid?"

"Yes."

"I want to be sure we understand you, Mr. Sentry. I asked you a moment since whether it occurred

to you that if you sent Miss Wines to Mrs. Sentry, Mrs. Sentry might misinterpret your interest in the girl. And you said, no. You said that Mrs. Sentry would have known that if there were anything between you and Miss Wines you would have told her. Is that correct?"

"Well—"

"Shall I ask the stenographer to read your testimony?"

"I said that, yes."

"So if you had been guilty with Miss Wines you would not have been

afraid; but being innocent, you were afraid? Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. You will pardon my perplexity?"

"Innocent people are often afraid!"

"So you want to leave it that Miss Wines came to appeal to you for money, or for help, and she wept, and you gave her nothing, and the next time you saw her you shot her? Is that correct?"

"I didn't see her till after the shot."

"Now Mr. Sentry, you saw Miss Wines three weeks before you shot her—"

Mrs. Sentry could no longer hear all that they said. She heard only " . . . you shot her?" " . . . you shot her?" " . . . you shot her?" as a tag to every question. She heard: " . . . three weeks later, you shot her?" And then: " . . . three weeks before you shot her?"

She saw, at a final question, Arthur's lips move, but no sound emerged; she could see that he was trembling, felt her own limbs tremble as though in sympathy. It seemed to her that she suffered in her own flesh the torment Arthur here endured. The protective numbness which had prevented her from feeling her own suffering could not now save her from feeling his.

Mr. Weldon suggested, "I did not hear what you said."

Arthur cried wretchedly, furiously, "Will you stop saying over and over that I shot her?"

"You did, didn't you?"

"Yes. By accident. I've told you so. But you don't have to keep repeating it like a parrot."

"Do my questions disturb you, Mr. Sentry?"

"You keep saying I shot her!"

"Very well, suppose I try to avoid using the phrase which disturbs you. Mr. Sentry, are you a hot-tempered man?"

"No. But you—"

"Never mind me. Would it make you angry now if I suggested that Miss Wines angered you just before—this fatal accident happened to her?"

you mean to shoot whoever was there?"

"No."

"But you fired in anger?"

"No."

"Put it this way. You were angry when you fired?"

"Yes."

"At what mark did you aim?"

"No mark. I couldn't see anything."

"This man who bumped you. He bumped you into the wall?"

"Yes."

"Which wall?"

"The right-hand wall, as you come up the back stairs, opposite my office door."

"Then he was on your left?"

"Yes."

"You knew where he was?"

"Yes."

"Did you shoot at him?"

"No."

"You shot straight ahead the corridor, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear the testimony this court that when you—"

Wines' death, the pistol was in her coat?"

"I tell you it was an accident."

"Did you hear that testimony?"

"Yes."

"Pressing against her coat?"

"Yes."

"When, by accident, in the the bullet emerged from the zle of the gun you were holding smashed through Miss Wines' heart, did you feel the your pistol touch anything?"

"No."

"Press against anything?"

"No."

"After the shot, what did hear?"

"A man running down the stairs."

"Didn't hear Miss Wines or fall?"

"No."

"And you say you didn't hear?"

"No."

"How far had you come from head of the stairs before you Miss Wines?"

"By accident."

"So you say."

"I was about opposite my door."

"And yet the muzzle of the was touching her?"

Mr. Sentry retorted, "Say!" Mrs. Sentry winced. That effort to be nonchalant; that echoing of Mr. Weldon's words had about it something pitiful, like the trembling of a hurt child trying to be brave.

Even Mr. Weldon seemed to this; he spoke almost gently.

"Pardon me, Mr. Sentry. I say! So the expert evidence Yet her body lay beyond your door?"

Mrs. Sentry's senses began again; the world was dizzy. Question and answer ran up conjuring up tragic details blended into a sinister whole, huddled body. Arthur, turning over, picking up the dead girl, putting it over her face. Taking his glove to feel for her pulse, ting it on again for fear of prints . . . Mrs. Sentry seeing herself for a while to be a bare, dingy corridor outside her band's office; that naked, less place like a tomb. To be with him, and the dead girl on floor; and he was crouching, fearfully over his shoulder, darting in stooped posture, Mercilessly Mr. Weldon came go over and over every detail scene; till she saw Arthur's streaming, heard Mr. Weldon's "I see you are flushed, people. Do you find it warm, Mr. Sentry? Would you like a window open?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

"Now Mr. Sentry, You Saw Miss Wines Three Weeks Before You Shot Her?"

afraid; but being innocent, you were afraid? Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. You will pardon my perplexity?"

"Innocent people are often afraid!"

"So you want to leave it that Miss Wines came to appeal to you for money, or for help, and she wept, and you gave her nothing, and the next time you saw her you shot her? Is that correct?"

"I didn't see her till after the shot."

"Now Mr. Sentry, you saw Miss Wines three weeks before you shot her—"

Mrs. Sentry could no longer hear all that they said. She heard only " . . . you shot her?" " . . . you shot her?" " . . . you shot her?" as a tag to every question. She heard: " . . . three weeks later, you shot her?" And then: " . . . three weeks before you shot her?"

She saw, at a final question, Arthur's lips move, but no sound emerged; she could see that he was trembling, felt her own limbs tremble as though in sympathy. It seemed to her that she suffered in her own flesh the torment Arthur here endured. The protective numbness which had prevented her from feeling her own suffering could not now save her from feeling his.

Mr. Weldon suggested, "I did not hear what you said."

Arthur cried wretchedly, furiously, "Will you stop saying over and over that I shot her?"

"You did, didn't you?"

"Yes. By accident. I've told you so. But you don't have to keep repeating it like a parrot."

"Do my questions disturb you, Mr. Sentry?"

"You keep saying I shot her!"

"Very well, suppose I try to avoid using the phrase which disturbs you. Mr. Sentry, are you a hot-tempered man?"

"No. But you—"

"Never mind me. Would it make you angry now if I suggested that Miss Wines angered you just before—this fatal accident happened to her?"

you mean to shoot whoever was there?"

"No."

"But you fired in anger?"

"No."

"Put it this way. You were angry when you fired?"

"Yes."

"At what mark did you aim?"

"No mark. I couldn't see anything."

"This man who bumped you. He bumped you into the wall?"

"Yes."

"Which wall?"

"The right-hand wall, as you come up the back stairs, opposite my office door."

"Then he was on your left?"

"Yes."

"You knew where he was?"

"Yes."

"Did you shoot at him?"

"No."

"You shot straight ahead the corridor, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear the testimony this court that when you—"

Wines' death, the pistol was in her coat?"

"I tell you it was an accident."

"Did you hear that testimony?"

"Yes."

"Pressing against her coat?"

"Yes."

"When, by accident, in the the bullet emerged from the zle of the gun you were holding smashed through Miss Wines' heart, did you feel the your pistol touch anything?"

"No."

"Press against anything?"

"No."

"After the shot, what did hear?"

"A man running down the stairs."

"Didn't hear Miss Wines or fall?"

"No."

"And you say you didn't hear?"

"No."

"How far had you come from head of the stairs before you Miss Wines?"

"By accident."

"So you say."

"I was about opposite my door."

"And yet the muzzle of the was touching her?"

Mr. Sentry retorted, "Say!" Mrs. Sentry winced. That effort to be nonchalant; that echoing of Mr. Weldon's words had about it something pitiful, like the trembling of a hurt child trying to be brave.

Even Mr. Weldon seemed to this; he spoke almost gently.

"Pardon me, Mr. Sentry. I say! So the expert evidence Yet her body lay beyond your door?"

Mrs. Sentry's senses began again; the world was dizzy. Question and answer ran up conjuring up tragic details blended into a sinister whole, huddled body. Arthur, turning over, picking up the dead girl, putting it over her face. Taking his glove to feel for her pulse, ting it on again for fear of prints . . . Mrs. Sentry seeing herself for a while to be a bare, dingy corridor outside her band's office; that naked, less place like a tomb. To be with him, and the dead girl on floor; and he was crouching, fearfully over his shoulder, darting in stooped posture, Mercilessly Mr. Weldon came go over and over every detail scene; till she saw Arthur's streaming, heard Mr. Weldon's "I see you are flushed, people. Do you find it warm, Mr. Sentry? Would you like a window open?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

"Now Mr. Sentry, You Saw Miss Wines Three Weeks Before You Shot Her?"

afraid; but being innocent, you were afraid? Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. You will pardon my perplexity?"

"Innocent people are often afraid!"

"So you want to leave it that Miss Wines came to appeal to you for money, or for help, and she wept, and you gave her nothing, and the next time you saw her you shot her? Is that correct?"

"I didn't see her till after the shot."

"Now Mr. Sentry, you saw Miss Wines three weeks before you shot her—"

Mrs. Sentry could no longer hear all that they said. She heard only " . . . you shot her?" " . . . you shot her?" " . . . you shot her?" as a tag to every question. She heard: " . . . three weeks later, you shot her?" And then: " . . . three weeks before you shot her?"

She saw, at a final question, Arthur's lips move, but no sound emerged; she could see that he was trembling, felt her own limbs tremble as though in sympathy. It seemed to her that she suffered in her own flesh the torment Arthur here endured. The protective numbness which had prevented her from feeling her own suffering could not now save her from feeling his.

Mr. Weldon suggested, "I did not hear what you said."

Arthur cried wretchedly, furiously, "Will you stop saying over and over that I shot her?"

"You did, didn't you?"

"Yes. By accident. I've told you so. But you don't have to keep repeating it like a parrot."

"Do my questions disturb you, Mr. Sentry?"

"You keep saying I shot her!"

"Very well, suppose I try to avoid using the phrase which disturbs you. Mr. Sentry, are you a hot-tempered man?"</