

WAS SHE AN ---? THE STORY OF A WOMAN'S SECRET.

BY JESSIE DAVIS BURTON.

CHAPTER III. EVEN LOVE LIKE YOURS COULD NOT STAND SUCH A TEST!

Quick as thought his arm encircled her, holding her powerless, while he coldly detached the tangle from his slender chain.

"Be thankful that I let you off so easily. One kiss for the sake of old times, my darling, and I'll be gone."

He moved as if he would sit in the seat to the word; but a flash in the eyes of the girl withheld him.

"If you dare, I'll kill you!" she said in the low, concentrated voice of deadly passion. "Dare to come near me again, and it will be the worse for you!"

"Little devil! You would like to kill me, wouldn't you? But I won't give you the chance just yet; not until you have married your prince and have settled down to live happily forever after."

Laughing, he turned from her, and was gone as he had come out into the wintry night.

"What do you think of her?" asked Fenn, as he walked back to his hotel through the frosty morning starlight with his friend.

"She is fascinating and—dangerous."

"Why dangerous?"

"Why, Mr. Dillon did not see fit at that moment to explain. He might have related the scene he had witnessed, but that would have been to acknowledge himself a deliberate eavesdropper, and, as such, desplicable in his friend's eyes. And August, with all the blind credulity of love and youth, would believe black white in the very face of his story if Juno Trent gave it her denial."

"Have you committed yourself yet—in words, I mean?"

"Not yet. I wanted you to see her, and your promise to be on my side first."

"Promise me that you will not, then—say, for a month. If I have not in that time proved the truth of my assertion, if I have not proved her a dangerous woman and no fit wife for you, I will at least not array myself against you. Is it a bargain?"

"Your prejudice is unworthy of you, Forde. It is no bargain."

"What! Afraid to face your folly in its true light, my boy? That is not like the brave race of Fenn."

"Afraid! Proves it to me and I will never look upon her face again. You will find that fear has no part in my folly—you would not call it that if you loved as I do, Dillon—not even fear that you may mar my future and blight all my remaining life by losing her to me as you have threatened. I will keep silent yet for a month."

"And I," thought Dillon, "will not only unvail her past within the month, but I will keep watch over her, even that she is, that she may not lure you into forgetfulness of your promise."

For a month Mr. Dillon devoted himself to the study of Juno Trent. After that night there was nothing approaching confidence between them. He cultivated Mrs. Everleigh for the sake of seeing her often, and watched the fresh, youthful face, brilliant and piquant, but never succeeded in surprising the shadow of a hidden sorrow, criminal or otherwise, he had seen there darkly once. Indeed, there was times when Mr. Dillon almost fancied that he must have dreamed that scene; times when Juno Trent's joyous laughter, and arch, coquetish ways sent his own sluggish blood leaping through his veins. You see, with his eyes open, he was deliberately letting the siren weave her meshes about him, was proving a traitor to his friend, to his own honor, in yielding to the power of the enchantress. There were even times when he fancied that the master passion which ruled her did not belong to August after all, but had been called into existence by himself.

Call the man weak and an egotist if you will, he had yet some foundation for that absurd fancy. She was never quite the same to him as she was to others. With him she was shy and constrained; her eyes fell before his glances; and once or

twice he had found her watching him with a scarcely concealed wistfulness—enough to touch the vanity of a man with less of the littleness of self-conceit than he.

He had played the part of a misanthrope, questioning whether this world held any good thing; he had been a skeptic, doubting the very existence of a future; and as if to rebuke his disbelief, had come the passion which placed him on a level with other men. For all time henceforth he could not hold himself aloof from them as he had done before; he loved as they had loved since the world began; he would win or lose as other men had done, as other men would do until the world ended.

And while he found his awakening, he had not forgotten his pledge or neglected his duty.

The last day of the month came, and an early hour found him in Mrs. Everleigh's parlor, awaiting the coming of that lady's companion, with his pulses at a strong beat of inward excitement, which his outward calm did not betray.

"I beg your pardon, I thought—"

Watching for her, as he was, she had come in so quietly that he had not heard. He wheeled, while she was looking doubtfully at him, and he thought that never had the sweet face been illuminated by a light so tender as the flitting one which passed from it swiftly under his gaze.

"Did you wish to see me, Mr. Dillon, or shall I go for Mrs. Everleigh?"

"I wish to see you, Miss Trent. I want to say what my friend has been telling me in seeking the prize."

And then in a rush of impassioned words she told.

"You love me?" she said, incredulously, an inexplicable expression in the dusk eyes, fixed steadily upon his face. "You overlook my humble position here, you forget that you know nothing of my past life, and, in spite of all, you can offer to make me your wife?"

"I neither overlook nor forget, and I know more of you than you think, but in spite of all, my greatest pride, my greatest happiness, will be in winning you."

"You know—what?" she demanded.

"I know that there is some secret in your life. I know you have some hidden trouble, that there are mysteries and entanglements not suspected by any of your later friends; but I have faith to believe that you can explain these things away; therefore I renew my suit for the hand of the only woman I have ever loved, the only one I have cared to marry. You do not speak, Juno. I am too presumptuous in thinking that my attachment is in some slight measure returned? Ah, Juno, you do love me, you must! Such love as mine must have won a return."

"You know that I have a secret? Will you tell me how you discovered that, and all you have discovered?"

"Do you force me to make my confession to you, my love? I have no excuse to offer now, but I only meant to fulfill my duty to August first. I set a detective to search out your record—don't think too hardly of me for that underhand act. It is all clear to the time that you, an under teacher in Madame Pomfret's school, suddenly and mysteriously disappeared therefrom; it is all clear again for the past two years, but there are four months lost out of your life of which there is no trace. Must I say more? I think I found the key-note of your secret trouble in your interview with that unknown man upon the night that I saw you first."

"Knowing all that, you must believe me an adventurer in the worst sense of the word, and yet you ask me to be your wife."

"Something in her steady, inscrutable gaze, something in her quiet tone, gave him a vague thrill of uneasiness."

"I do ask it. In spite of my senses, you hold me enthralled. I can forgive and forget anything rather than lose you. Give me the assurance and the explanation I ask. Tell me that my trust is not misplaced, that I am not mistaken; that you do love me, even as I love you! Tell me, with your own sweet lips, that I may be best!"

He stretched out his hands to her appealingly, but she cluded them. She drew herself up to her full height, and the slender little form seemed to expand and grow taller, the dusk eyes flashed sternly.

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