

[Written for the Wisconsin]
The Impulse of a Moment

by S. K. Murdock

It was twilight on the Hudson, and the Albany boat was passing the Palisades. The usual gay company on the upper deck were enjoying the lovely scene, each bend in the river presenting new beauties to view. A gentleman, who had been walking listlessly up and down, finally threw himself in a seachair in a shadowy corner, and was soon wandering on the borders of dreamland. But it was too choice a spot to be left for any great length of time in sole possession of an unsentimental sleeper; soon a young lady and gentleman entered and sat cosily down in close proximity to the slumbering traveler. As they did so, the gentleman kissed his companion on the cheek. She started, and looked over towards the dreamer.

“Never mind the old codger, little wife, he is fast asleep,” laughed her husband.

She still seemed embarrassed and said: “May he not know all we say, and yet be partially asleep? May not his mind be awake while his body slumbers?”

“You mean,” said he, “may he not be sleeping with one eye open?”

“Hush! hush!” she replied, “he certainly will receive some impression of our rudeness.”

“What if he does, my dear?” returned the gentleman, “he will imagine it all a dream, and grow green with jealousy; or, [maybe], interpret the dream to mean that he himself will [sometime] be blessed with such a prudent little wife.”

“How do you know that he is not married?” she asked.

“Ha! Ha! And do you suppose if he had a wife, she would allow him to wax his mustaches, and twirl them at an angle of forty-two degrees? No! ‘old bachelor’ is stamped on his every feature.”

Do you ask why the gentleman did not confront them? Simply because he could not. His body was asleep, while his brain remained sufficiently awake to hear the conversation, although intermingled with his dreams; for we only dream when most nearly awake. He had been through a season of intense watchfulness, and for months, had been obliged to sleep with his brain on the alert, until his nerves were completely unstrung; and now that he had the opportunity for real rest, his physical nature seemed unable to return to its normal condition.

After this last sentence, however, the words grew confused in his mind, and he was conscious of no more positive impressions—until the boat came to a standstill—so suddenly as to almost overthrow his comfortable chair.

Finding himself at last in New York he soon was comfortably situated at the Grand Central, and at dinner was surprised to recognize in the voices of his neighbors at the table the unmistakable accents of the fond husband and his “little wife” of his waking dream. The lady blushed deeply, while even her husband colored slightly. And indeed the gentleman himself could not help looking a little conscious.

The party spent some time in New York and soon came to be on friendly terms. And when Dr. Roslyn and his wife decided on a trip to Block Island they invited their now fast friend—the “old codger” of steamer celebrity—to go with them.

Seated one day on the rock-bound coast and gazing out over the broad and changing sea, Richard Allen became convinced that the sad expression that at times stole into Dr. Roslyn’s face meant more than an ordinary experience, and true to his instincts, longed to become acquainted with the facts of his friend’s life. He had not long to wait.

Seeing his intent gaze fixed on her husband Mrs. Roslyn said: “You speak of Jack as appearing so boyish, yet he was a widower when we were married,” and the same peculiar look—mingled sadness and horror—crept into her eyes.

“Yes,” Jack exclaimed, “let me tell you: My father lives in a western town, and in his old age has become a Spiritualist. We have often discussed the subject, and I have told him that the Spiritualists were blocking the way to scientific research by placing half understood discoveries in mesmerism in the service of the Devil and trying to persuade people that it is a religion. My father is wealthy, and was in no hurry for me to start out for myself. ‘What?’ he would exclaim, ‘a boy like you take, your diploma and set up in practice? Wait until you show a few gray hairs, my son; there is plenty of time.’ My first wife was a daughter of a friend of his youth. We had always known of our fathers’ wish for our union. We loved each other—I think now—more as brother and sister. When I wished to go to Boston to study medicine, my father remonstrated, ‘and leave Edith for four years?’ he said (I was then hardly 20.) ‘Why not have a gay wedding, my boy, and take her with you? My money will all be yours in a few years, and I am not sorry that there will be more than you will need.’ So it was arranged, and the day was soon at hand, for I had to be in Boston in September. The wedding day was serene and cloudless; nothing occurred to mar the occasion or warn us of impending danger. It was very late that night when, after helping my father make all safe after the last guest had departed, I went to our room and found Edith asleep after the excitement of the day, and it was not many minutes before [I] followed her into dream-land. The next time I opened my eyes I saw her dressed, with her hand on the door. The bright, warm August sunlight was streaming in upon me, and she stood laughing at my attempts to open my eyes. ‘It looks so lovely out in the garden; I’m going out among the flowers to enjoy the pleasantest part of the day,’ she said, and was gone before I could utter a word. I intended to follow her, but dropped asleep, and was awakened by screams from the garden of which I could distinguish only the words, ‘she is dead! dead!’ I hastily threw on my clothes, and can explain nothing further, except that there lay my beautiful wife with my revolver in her hand—dead. We left no stone unturned to unravel the mystery, which remains unsolved [today]. The coroner’s jury sent in the verdict ‘suicide.’ Never did a poor girl live to put more than one shot through her own heart, and the physicians tell me that, by the state of the heart, she did not fire even one of the shots. We obtained the best legal advice and had a most thorough

investigation, but in vain. My father wished me to leave the sad place and travel; but I felt that hard work was the best thing for me, so I finished my studies at college, took my degree, and with my 'little wife' (looking affectionately at her) have now decided to return to the old homestead and find a clue to the mystery."

His wife, who had listened thus far in silence, exclaimed: "I have a good deal of intuition, and here is a place where I may be able to exert it to some purpose!"

Richard Allen arose, and extending a hand to each, said with earnestness: "And I have been a private detective for many years; claim my assistance when it can be of use in any way."

The tears came to Jack Roslyn's eyes as he answered: "Bless you both! Let us never give up until something is proven."

Richard Allen lived in a large western city, near which the family home of the Roslyns stood. Hardly a week passed but what his advice was asked in some new idea, or he was called to examine [someone] who thought they had a clue, but nothing definite ever came of it.

Late in December Mr. Allen received a telegram calling him to Jack Roslyn's bedside. Everything was done for his friend, but in a few days he breathed his last.

Richard attended to every detail, and proved himself a friend in need to the stricken family. After all was over and he came to bid adieu to Mrs. Roslyn and her now aged and infirm father-in-law, he said: "Shall we give up our search now?"

"No, indeed," they both exclaimed. So he came and went as before.

A few years passed, and one bright New Year's Day, Richard Allen and Mrs. Roslyn were quietly married. When old Mr. Roslyn died, he left his property to them, and they built a modern house on the site of the old homestead. Their family grew up in that happy home together, until at last it was deemed best to send Edith, their eldest daughter, to Vassar.

The last day at home had arrived, and Edith had gone out to take her last look at the beautiful place where she had spent so many happy hours. Everything was so lovely that she almost wished she had not decided to go, and felt on the verge of having a "good cry," when a rustling at her side caused her to glance up, and she beheld a woman dressed in deepest black, which gave to her pale, wan face a ghostly appearance.

The woman gazed earnestly at Edith for a moment, then shook her head. "I thought I was in Mr. Roslyn's garden," she finally said, as she gazed sadly around.

Just then some voice from the house called: "Edith! come here a moment"—

"Edith!" gasped the woman, as she turned, if possible, even paler than before. Then her mind seemed to wander:—"Oh! Edith, why did I send you to an early grave? Why did I mar so many lives, and ruin my own, in a fit of insane jealousy?"

Edith caught hold of her. "Tell me, did you do it?" she cried in horror.

The woman replied in a stifled voice. "Yes, your name brought it all back to me." Then, as a shudder passed through her frame she struggled to be free, and cried: "Let me go! There is no place for me to hide my head but in yonder lake."

But Edith was determined to hear it all, and quietly lead her through a side passage to her room, when she gladly— as if to rid her mind of a part of its burden —told her story.

"My name is Anna Weston. I was left an orphan, to the care of my uncle, Mr. Roslyn. He was all that a father could be to me, and I should have been perfectly happy in my kind home, but for the pangs of unrequited love; for I loved Jack Roslyn, though he never knew it. And when it was decided that he should marry Edith— neither of them loving excepting as brother and sister—I thought my cup of bitterness was full. I passed a sleepless night after the wedding, and in the morning went early into the garden to cool my fevered brain. As I walked in an unfrequented path, I found Edith, pinning an old letter to the fence. 'Come Anna, let us have some sport,' she cried, as I came in sight. 'Here is Jack's revolver, he said yesterday that I couldn't hit the side of a barn; and I am determined to show him that girls can shoot. Now you try first,' as she handed me the pistol. With my brain on fire, but outwardly cool and collected, I took the pistol and fired. The letter fell. 'Splendid,' cried Edith, as she ran down to replace the target. 'Oh! how I wish I could shoot her dead,' was the thought that flashed through mind, without any idea of doing so, however. At that instant the report of the pistol rang out, and whether it was an involuntary contraction of the muscles or not, I know no more than you. I had killed her, nevertheless, and for a moment felt only exaltation at the thought. I went close to her—she was dead—and I fired three times through her heart; then laid the revolver in her hand, and went into the house to help prepare breakfast as usual. No one questioned or seemed to notice me. I was somewhat of an invalid, and had been preparing for a European trip with an aunt of mine, expecting to travel with Jack and his bride, as far as New York. I went alone, and have remained abroad until now, under the pretense that the climate agreed with me."

After this confession the woman seemed completely exhausted, and lay with her eyes closed, as if asleep.

Edith glided softly out, and locking the door, ran down to her father, and in as few words as possible told him the long wished for solution of the mystery.

They returned in haste to Edith's room. It was empty. A fine cambric handkerchief with 'Anna' embroidered in the corner lay on the sofa. But she had disappeared, as completely as if she had never been seen.

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