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THE SILENT WIFE!

Remarkable Drama of Married Life.

By MARK ENGLISH.

CHAPTER I.

DORIS THOBURY.

It was not a very big ward; it only contained some thirty cots, but it was bright, airy, and sunshiny.

There was a bird singing merrily in its cage, and toys and picture-books, and everywhere a wealth of flowers. There were only two nurses to the ward. It was such a small one it did not need more. Indeed, there was only one in the ward at the moment.

Sister Doris sat in a chair at the end of the ward, so that she could keep her eye on it right the way down.

It was really miraculous how she managed to keep as neat and tidy as she did, how she managed to look as cool as she did, for there were two little ones nestling one on either knee, whilst a little fellow with one leg and a stump had clambered up at the back of her chair, and had got his arms round her neck as though he meant to strangle her, while his poor little face—and yet it was a laughing face now—peeped round to look at her; an elder child, also with crutches—crutches were predominant in the ward—was bending over the chair, and there were a couple more sprawling at her feet.

In the beds near, three little ones who could sit up were propped there with pillows, straining their ears to listen to the conversation, dolls and teddy-bears lying by neglected; and even in two other beds, where the little ones were too ill to move, they turned their faces, so that they might feast their eyes with looking at "dear Sister."

"And so you must know—" said Sister Doris; and then, "Tommy, if you squeeze me so tightly round the neck I can't tell you the story."

There was just a fraction of relaxation in Tommy's grip, rather grudgingly given, it must be owned, and the cripple girl by her side looked up with grave reproof.

"Tommy, don't be so rough with dear Sister," she urged; while a little voice from one of the beds added:

"Tommy, keep quiet! We want to hear Sister finish the story."

"That's better," said Sister Doris, with a sigh of relief. "And so you must know that the wolf-jumped out of bed on purpose to eat Red Riding-hood, and he went—"

That was as far as the story went, for at that moment the matron entered by the door at the end of the ward, and behind the matron came Dr Weston.

Ah, kindly-hearted little Sister, whose cheeks had hardly flushed with the exertion of the straining and with the crowd of children round her, what did they take such a deep tint now for, the moment her eyes rested on the kindly face of the young doctor, who had already made his name in the world, and who gave so much of his time to the hospital here, bestowing quite as much attention upon the poor and the needy as he would have given to his richest private patient?

And why did Paul Weston, as he looked up the ward, think to himself what a beautiful picture? Did he mean the whole group, or did he mean Sister Doris alone? Whichever he meant he was perfectly correct. It was a beautiful picture, and she was a beautiful picture, too.

She rose now, and put her little charges gently down; Tommy, somewhat rebellious, and hardly awed by the presence of the matron, seeming to resent this interruption to the story-telling.

Tall, somewhat slight, very graceful, an oval face, delicate, regular features, perfectly arched brows, and beneath a pair of honest grey eyes; a refined face, and an intellectual face. Some might have wondered how a girl as talented as Doris Thobury could be satisfied with the life she was now leading; indeed, some of her father's friends had laughingly said, what was the good of Gorton? It did not need a college education and honours well won to qualify as a nurse in the children's ward of a small cottage hospital. So they declared.

It was a beautiful face, so the doctor thought, beautiful when there was laughter in the eyes, and beautiful when those eyes were full of tears, and when the delicate lips quivered as she watched the pain of some poor little mite of a child was called upon to suffer.

"Sister Doris!" The matron was very precise in the words. Outside it was often, "My dear Doris," or "My dear girl," but

now it was—"Sister Doris, I am afraid that you let the children make you over-tired. You pet them too much."

Doris looked round with a smile—as though she could pet them too much, when she had room in her heart for every one of them!

And now the serious business of the afternoon had to commence. The doctor had to examine his patients. Some of the little one knew that, tender as he was, he must hurt them. But they were so brave if they could only hold dear Sister's hand. And sometimes, when a little face would wince, at little pair of pain-filled eyes would turn and glance up at her, and meet her steadfast gaze, and then there would come a smile, a pitiful little smile, instead of the wail of pain. And then, when the painful examination was over, the doctor would pat the child's head, and say:

"There, now you have been very good to-day." And like as not the answer would come:

"Because Sister was by; Sister was looking at me."

Was it worth it? said her father's friends.

Surely it was worth it. She was so happy here. This was her realm, and there was; perhaps, another cause for happiness, a deeper and holier one, that made her grave and thoughtful when, later in the day, her duties over, she went out for the walk and rest that were needful.

To-night she stood hesitating which way to go at the gate of the hospital, when Dr Weston came out.

"Well, Miss Thobury, which way are you going to-night?"

"I suppose I must take my usual constitutional," she answered, "round by the park."

"And may I accompany you?"

What made the brave little heart beat so much more quickly? He had never asked her that before, though sometimes he had strolled a little way and left her. She gave her consent, and they walked along side by side, truly a well-matched pair.

They spoke about many things, though it was obvious that the doctor was ill at ease. He stole shy, guarded glances at the girl, and at length, catching her kindly smile, he said suddenly:

"Miss Thobury, I have long wanted an opportunity to speak to you alone, but I have waited because I was frightened. Like a gambler who is impelled to stake his all upon one fatal throw, yet hesitates to do so because he realises that if he loses all is lost. I have hesitated, but the stake has got to be made now."

"Miss Thobury, I love you—love you with all my heart and soul! I have watched you in your work, so full of kindly sympathy and pity—the very angel of the ward! I have envied the little ones there, because you have given them your love. I have longed to be one of them. When I saw that little rascal this afternoon clutch you round the neck and kiss you, I felt that I could almost have changed places with him for the privilege. I know, of course, that your father is a wealthy man; but, Miss Thobury, although you and I do not want to talk of anything mercenary, I myself am well-to-do. It depends upon you to a great extent what my future will be. I have now had an offer to go away."

"To go away?" she said.

"Yes; to accompany an exploration party, I have been tempted to do so, but I do not think I shall. I want that money cannot buy. I want love! Doris—" He stopped. "Forgive me. I did not mean to take that liberty!"

But she turned and held out her hands to him, and that which he read in her eyes made his heart beat with happiness.

"I suppose I ought not to speak these words to you before I have seen your father," he went on; but, on the other hand, I could not have gone to him without your consent. That would have been unforgivable. And so, like the gambler, Doris, I have staked all. Have I lost or won?"

Just for a moment she dropped her head; then she raised it, and looked at him steadfastly, and the answer came:

"You have won!"

When they parted that night, Doris was the happiest girl in the world. But when the morning came a telegram reached her which quickly clouded her joy.

"Come home immediately," it ran. "You are wanted at once.—FATHER."

It troubled her. What ever could have

happened at home? She showed it to the matron, and Miss Daltry said sympathisingly:

"Pray Heaven, my dear child, it is no trouble for you! Of course, you must go. It is your father who sends for you, and your first duty is to him."

And so she went, and little faces looked after her with disappointment upon them, and little eyes gazed longingly.

What made her stand in the door and look back? What brought that sudden pain to her heart, as though it was breaking?

Was it the shadow of what was coming—the what was to be—implied in those words:

"Duty first?"

CHAPTER II.

THE BARGAIN.

"Those are my terms! Take them or leave them! Accept, and I will pull you through; reject, and you are ruined!" And the speaker brought his hand down heavily upon the table, as if to emphasise that last sentence.

Both men had risen to their feet, and they stood now, one on either side of the table, the very antithesis of each other. The speaker was a strong, a hard man; strength and hardness seemed stamped upon him—a broad, muscular frame, a square, clean-shaven face, with hard jaw and firm nostril, broad brow, and clear, unwavering eye; a man not to be turned lightly from his purpose; a man to go forward, no matter what obstacle was in the way.

And the other? A lazy, easy-going, trouble-hating man, as weak as the other was strong; obstinate, perhaps, but obstinacy and weakness frequently do go together.

There were dismay, anger, surprise, all mingling now on that somewhat sensuous face as he listened. It was the first unpleasant shock that Walter Thobury had received for some years, and he found it very disconcerting.

As Rodger Armer, his manager, noted the look he nodded.

"Don't make any mistake in this matter, Mr Thobury," he said. "I am telling you the simple truth. My price is your daughter's hand."

In his younger days Walter Thobury had been what he termed an unfortunate man, his misfortunes being directly attributable to the fact that he was a lazy man; then his uncle had died and left him his sole heir, and he had come into the huge business of Thobury and Co., a business from which he derived a comfortable fortune.

But he did not trouble himself about the business Rodger Armer had been there at the head of things, and Walter Thobury was quite content for him to remain there. He did not understand the business, and he did not want to.

It was nice to walk through sometimes, and to see the extent of his premises, and the number of his staff; but even that was a pleasure that soon palled, and when Walter Thobury wanted to consult with his manager it was generally at his own mansion that the interviews were held.

Walter Thobury's wife had died before good fortune came to him, leaving him with one child, a daughter.

It was only of late that her father had begun to think seriously of Doris. She was a very beautiful woman, a very graceful and charming woman, and it was absurd that she should be wasting her life at that hospital.

Walter Thobury contemplated an advantageous marriage for his daughter, and now all his schemes and dreams were shattered, blown to the winds by Rodger Armer.

He had received a couple of very unpleasant intimations—one from his bank, another from his accountants. He sent for Armer, and the manager came, calm and inscrutable. Walter Thobury wanted to know what it all meant, what was going wrong. The manager listened and answered. Everything was going wrong.

"It simply means that you have been living beyond your limits. I have told you of it before. Now the end has come, and it is ruin!"

Walter Thobury wrung his hands. He begged, implored, entreated.

Could not his dear Armer do anything? And the answer came:

Yes, Rodger Armer would save him, ex-

tricate him from his difficulties, make everything right again. Rodger Armer could do it, and would do it, on one condition, and one condition only, and there was no hesitation about naming it. His condition was a thing foreign to Armer's nature.

"My price is your daughter's hand," he said. What wonder that the father was astounded, staggered! He had never dreamt of his manager caring for Doris. When they had met Armer had been quiet, and so far as he knew, respectful. He was not a man to connect with love. There was a wave of angry indignation. Walter Thobury raved, but the manager was calm.

"There is no need for angry words, sir," he said. "Those are my terms! If you cannot assent to them, things must go."

"But how can I do it? Think, man, think of my daughter! How can I compel her?"

"That is for you to decide, sir."

"But you can't mean it; you can't be serious. Her affections—"

"I am not talking of affections, sir. And I am serious—so serious that, if you decline, I must resign my position immediately."

The hapless Thobury sat and stared at him blankly. It was not that he was moved so much by any consideration for his daughter, any love for her. His pride was hurt, his plans were disturbed.

"I didn't think of you, Armer!" was his feeble protest.

Rodger Armer smiled.

"My dear Mr Thobury, I have pointed out to you again and again how things were going, and you have neglected my warnings. I knew you would neglect them, and I had a purpose in view—to win your daughter. I knew well enough that if I came as an ordinary suitor I should stand no chance. I do not come as an ordinary suitor. I come as a man who has something to offer for that which he desires. I come to make a bargain."

He knew Mr Thobury would yield. He knew how weak and helpless he was; he knew that even the high price he asked would be paid.

CHAPTER III.

DUTY DEMANDS.

"Father, you are not in earnest; you cannot mean what you are saying! Mary Mr Armer! I cannot do it—I cannot do it! You cannot possibly be in earnest!"

She had risen. She stood at first in silence, as though she had been unable to comprehend what he was talking about, and when at last the full hideousness of the awful request dawned upon her, her whole young nature rose in protest. It was an outrage against her very womanhood. Her whole soul shrank aghast from the idea!

He sat there, and much as she loved him, noble-souled as she was, it seemed to her that he was almost an object of contempt. His pleading had become so abject, he wept almost manly tears, she thought, he wrung his delicate hands, so carefully manicured, so heavily ornamented with rings. But he never faltered, he never said he would rather accept the ruin than ask this sacrifice.

"My dear Doris," he said, "I suppose we ought to take it as a compliment. It is a rough wooing, but he says he will make you to be his wife. He says he will make everything right if you will marry him, so, you see, you must marry him!"

"Father, you cannot mean it! I cannot—cannot do it!"

But the man did mean it. He had put to go through with it now. He knew it was not the slightest use threatening or commanding. He grovelled on his knees before his daughter. He clutched at her skirt; he would not listen to her entreaties to get up.

"If a father must humble himself," he said, "I humble myself. I entreat you, Doris. Armer's a fine fellow, he is a splendid fellow. And think what it means. The poverty, my dear, the degradation, the disgrace! And all of it can be averted. It is really a very generous offer of Armer's. He will be indulgent in every way, and you'll have a splendid home. 'A splendid home!' She stuck her head. "Under such circumstances the world could most glorious palace in the world could only be a prison!" And then: "Father, only be a prison!" And then: "Father, you must get up! I will listen to nothing—until you get up and behave rationally."