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CHAPTER IV.

ENGAGED.

"My dear Doris, your father tells me that you will favour my suit. I need hardly assure you that I am sensible of the honour that you do me."

"Stop!" She turned on him with a quick gesture, an imperious gesture. "Let there be no mistakes between us, Mr Armer."

"My name is Roger," he said. "I called you Doris."

"I am aware you did, you have purchased me, and therefore I suppose you are at liberty to call me what you like; but to me you are Mr Armer."

Just a little compression of the lips, and a bow.

"Very well," he said.

"I repeat, let there be no mistake between us. You say my father told you that I will favour your suit. My father, through some villainy of yours, I presume, has got into your power, and the only way of escape is for him to sacrifice his daughter. I have listened to his pleadings, and I have elected to pay the price. There is no question of accepting; I am helpless, and there is no question of your being honoured. Let there be no mistakes and no mockery. I respected you as my father's manager. I respect you no longer."

He smiled, he rather liked her for her candour.

"Let me remind you, my dear Doris"—it seemed that he almost emphasised that word—"that all is fair in love and war. Because I loved you, and because I saw no other way of winning you, I have chosen this way."

"Love!" she retorted. "Do not defame that holy word by speaking of it. Love would have died sooner than do a thing of this sort. Love would have suffered anything rather than stoop so low. You love! You do not know what love means. Now listen to me. Only yesterday a man whom I loved asked me to be his wife, and I consented. Since then I have had to write to him and break off the engagement. But make no mistake, Mr Armer, my love is not yours, and never will be yours. You may have secured the casket, but the gem which it contains is given to another. Do not say that I am deceiving you. That is all that I wish to remark. And now, if you have nothing to say to me, there is not the slightest reason why we should continue this conversation."

He had come to the fireplace where she was, he stood there leaning his elbow upon the mantel, contemplating her gravely.

"Certainly I must thank you for your candour, Doris," he said; "but it does not influence me in the slightest. I was not so foolish as to expect that there could be any affection for me in your heart—that will come by and by—in fact, we may find our wedded life will be all the happier because we do not begin with any romantic nonsense. Now, since you do not wish to be alone with me, by all means let us rejoin your father."

"And, as far as possible," she said, "let us avoid this subject. There is no need for anything to be said in reference to it—at any rate, between ourselves. I suppose, for common decency's sake, we must keep some sort of appearance before outsiders. If you have any consideration at all, I would suggest that you leave me as free as possible." And he answered, with just the trace of a mocking smile, by repeating her own words:

"We must keep up some sort of appearance before outsiders."

The engagement was announced. Perhaps some were surprised. They said that Doris Thobury might have looked higher. But those who looked upon her father as a man of wealth flattered and fawned, and offered their congratulations. What a life it was for her, but she schooled herself to go through with it. People wondered at her aspect, she did not act her part, and Roger Armer did not care to act his.

"Doris and I," so he said to some, "have advanced ideas. We do not believe in romantic exuberance of passion, and we respect and admire each other all the more because of it. Still waters run deepest, you know." So he passed the thing off.

"I should like you to come with me,

Doris," he said one day, it was only a week after that. "I want to show you the new home I have chosen for you."

"It does not matter to me," she answered, "where we live. It is for you to choose."

Perhaps it is to his credit that he remained so absolutely patient.

"Most women care to see the home they are to live in," he remonstrated.

"A prisoner cares very little to see the prison in which she is to be confined," was her answer. "You are taking me to a prison. I have not the slightest interest in what arrangements you make, Mr Armer."

"Very well. I shall have to tax my ingenuity as best I can to see that I make your prison as comfortable as possible for you."

Was she doing right? The thought came to Doris as she sat alone. The words of Miss Daltry concerning duty came to her mind. She had taken this step, she had been coerced, but it was taken. It occurred to her as she sat alone that she even owed some sort of duty to Roger Armer. She was to be his wife; there was no question of love or affection, but the very fact that she was accepting that position entailed duties. Even in her misery and wretchedness Doris was a conscientious girl. Was she doing right to treat his suggestion that she should go and see her new home, and give her own orders, in such an ungracious fashion?

Duty to her was no longer a sweet happy thing; it was, indeed, a hard, thorny road, but it was the road; and convincing herself that she was wrong, she sought the first opportunity of putting it right, so when he called the next day she said to him:

"Roger"—it was the first time she had used his Christian name, and he started—"I have been thinking of what you said."

"Yes?" How coldly it was spoken.

"I will be pleased to come with you when you like to see our home."

"I am sorry, but I am busy at present; I can make no appointment just now."

It was ungenerous of him. He might have known what it had cost her to humble herself so much, and he met her advances in that way. Any yielding in Doris was checked: she was the cold, indifferent woman once more.

"Oh, I am sorry," she answered. "Do not trouble yourself." And so the chance was allowed to pass.

She had received no answer to her letter to Paul Weston, but she had had two letters from Miss Daltry; kindly letters. How her heart longed to go and see her old friend once more, to tell her of all her troubles, to ask her advice. She instinctively realised that Miss Daltry was disappointed, and she felt that she would have to go and talk with her.

The time was drawing close—terribly close; how she shrank from it! The nearer it came, the more joyful and merry her father grew. They had a dinner-party. It was a fortnight—only a fortnight before the wedding, and Roger Armer was staying as a guest in the house that night. How glad she was when it was all over; how glad to creep away to her own room, to throw herself on her knees and pray for strength to face the ordeal. The more she thought of it the more she dreaded it. Alas, it seemed as though prayer was unanswered now.

She crept to bed at last, to fall into an uneasy sleep, from which she was aroused with a sudden start. What was the matter? How hot the air seemed, she could hardly breathe, and what strange smell was this? A smell of burning! She opened her bedroom door, the corridor was full of smoke, and beyond the smoke was an ugly, sullen glow.

She ran back to her room. Doris was no more deficient in courage than most people, but there is something so dreadful in fire; the smoke seems to benumb the brain, a sense of helplessness possesses the body.

The house was on fire! Her window was too high for her to reach the ground, and as she cowered there the thought came that, perhaps this was an answer to her prayer. Perhaps this was Heaven's way to freedom; a short, dreadful, fiery way, but—a way.

Who was that? Who was that who burst into her room crying hoarsely:

"Doris! Doris, are you there?"

She raised herself. It was Roger Ar-

mer. He caught her in his arms and, snatching the clothing from the bed, wrapped it round her.

"Lie still," he said. "Don't be frightened, I'll see you through."

And then there came to her a sense of his strength, not only of body, but strength of spirit. When he set her down she was in the open air. He himself was but half-dressed, and it seemed to her that the fire had scorched his face.

He turned quickly.

"Take your young mistress away and see to her," he said to the servants; but she broke from them.

"My father!" she cried desperately.

"Where is he? Is he safe?"

"Your father? I forgot him."

Just at that moment Walter Thobury appeared at a window above. He was shrieking, gesticulating, begging for help, and she seized the man she was to marry by the arm.

"Save him!" she cried. "Save my father!"

He looked at her strangely, there was a world of meaning in that look, then he turned and was gone.

People stood shivering, gasping, and she knelt there, cowed with the horror of it. The face disappeared from the window, a belch of flame took its place, and then—then Armer came out, staggering with his burden in his arms. Willing hands would have relieved him, but he pushed through them, he carried his burden to where Doris was, and laid the swooning man on the ground with something of an expression of contempt on his face. Then he turned to her.

"I have done your bidding," he said. "I have saved your father."

An then she—had she had time to think she would not have done it—but overcome with a burst of gratitude, realising that this man had risked his life; realising, too, that she and her father both owed their lives to him, she put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Thank you, Roger," she said.

He started back, there was a smile, a cold smile, and then:

"Oh, really, there is nothing to make an exhibition about. You had better go with the servants. I will see how this damage can be checked."

She went. Oh, it would have been better if he had left her to perish in the fire, far better. Why did this man want to bind her to him when he despised her so much? But she would be careful never to give him cause for contempt again.

"And so that chance—the second chance—was gone. Would another never come?"

CHAPTER V.

WEDDED.

"I'll tell you what it is, Armer, you're marrying my daughter, but you're not getting a slave. Remember a father's feelings, sir."

Those were the words which Doris heard as she entered. Her father and her future husband were quarrelling, and her father had been drinking; she knew it. "You're not buying a horse or a dog. It's my daughter, sir, and there's time enough yet to break the match off."

"Is there?" was the answer. "You will find there will be time enough to ruin you, then. Don't you try anything of that sort, Mr Thobury."

"Oh, I—I—" How quickly the man knuckled under—"I didn't mean that exactly. But you don't understand the girl. Of course, she doesn't care for you, she's got a proud spirit."

"Pray do not interfere in those matters, Mr Thobury." How contemptuously he spoke. "Believe me, after to-morrow Doris will be my wife, and I will find means to curb that self-same proud spirit. You have no need to feel any anxiety upon that score, I—"

He stopped, and for once he looked confused as Doris walked in.

"I am sorry I have overheard your conversation," she said; and that was all.

Then she went to her room to sit down to—Heaven help her!—to do what? It seemed as though she could not even pray now. And this was the way in which her future husband looked upon her. He would break her spirit. He should not! She would meet spirit with spirit. Roger Armer should find that he had not got the best of the bargain after all.

Hers was a weary sleep that night, and hers a bitter awakening. How many maidens awake with joy and gladness to greet their wedding-day, what high hopes are in their hearts, but what misery was in hers? Had they aroused her to tell her to prepare for execution, she could not have felt more solemn, more sombre.

There were so many friends, such a crowd, such a wine drinking, such a popping of champagne corks, such laughter. Then at last she found herself alone with her father, driving to the church. And he tried to be so jovial.

"My dear girl," he said, "I shall never forget what you have done to help me, and I am sure that your filial duty will be crowned with happiness."

It pleased him to talk in that way, it ministered to his vanity; but she said all and made no answer. She was as one in a dream. Was this the church? Were they there so soon? Mechanically she passed in, treading on the thick carpet that had been laid down. She was conscious, in a vague way, of hundreds and hundreds of faces staring at her, and she thought, so they must have stared in the arena of old in ancient Rome, as they watched the victims go to their death.

The bride, with a face white as the veil which covers her, as white as the spotless blossoms of her bouquet, a bride who, as one in a dream, passes into the church on her father's arm, while the bridesmaids fall in two and two behind, the youngest bearing her train.

A hum of admiration, smiles everywhere. "Our dear Doris looks beautiful, but our dear Doris certainly does not look over-well. Perhaps it is the excitement, or it may be natural nervousness," although most people did not think that "dear Doris" was of a nervous disposition. The gentlemen especially say to themselves that "dear Doris" was worthy of a better bridegroom than Roger Armer. He goes forward to meet her, her father relinquishes his place, and so they stand, man and woman, before the altar-rail, and the church becomes silent as the vicar commences the service.

"Dearly beloved, we are met here before God and this congregation to join this man and woman together in holy matrimony."

And so the service goes on until it comes to the words, "To love, to honour, and obey."

A pause. To love, to honour, and obey! Can she—can she say those words? Their meaning burst upon her all in a moment. Facing her, in the centre of the great stained window over the high altar, was the representation of the Saviour, and underneath a scroll bearing the words, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

The truth! Could she say those words! The bridesmaids were startled, one whispered to another that "dear Doris looked as though she was going to faint." Her father looked concerned; the bridegroom, stern and calm, watched her intently.

"To love, to honour, and obey," the vicar repeated in low tones.

It was impossible, it was horrible, it was a mockery. It seemed to her as though something snapped in her brain, and she gasped out:

"I cannot say that!"

They heard it, the vicar heard it, the bridesmaids heard it, her father heard it, friends clustering round and smiling heard it. What did the bride mean? Had she gone mad? They looked at each other in amazement.

"My dear Doris," protested her father; but she paid no attention to him.

"The words of the service must be repeated," said the vicar gravely. "I cannot continue unless you answer."

"Doris!" said her father again, in a theatrical whisper.

People were standing up in their seats now, an electric thrill ran through the great congregation. The bride had refused to go on with the service! Whoever heard of such a thing? Local reporters very busy with their pencils. Here was something that would make a good story indeed. The bridegroom's friends were indignant. Was the girl mad?

And then the bridegroom spoke.

"Are you going to say those words, Doris?"

It was asked in a low tone and she answered:

"I cannot!"