

THE SILENT WIFE!

Remarkable Drama of Married Life.

By MARK ENGLISH.

THE FIRST PART.

Doris Thobury, the sister of the children's ward, was telling the little ones stories, when the door opened and the matron and Dr Weston came in. Doris's cheeks took a deep tint, for she loved the kindly, grave-faced young doctor deeply.

As the doctor went his rounds, she held each little patient's hand, for the pain never seemed so bad when Sister Doris was near, and when all the patients had been examined her duty for the day was over.

As she was going out of the Cottage Hospital gate, Paul Weston overtook her. "May I accompany you?" he asked, and she smiled and nodded. They spoke of many things, and at last when they had reached a more secluded spot the doctor seized her hand.

"Miss Thobury," he said, "I love you—I love you with all my heart and soul. Will you be my wife?" She looked at him steadfastly as she answered "Yes." It was some time later when they parted, and when they did so Doris was the happiest girl in the world.

The next morning she received a telegram: "Come home immediately," it ran. "You are wanted at once." And a little later she was speeding towards her home.

At the very moment she was answering Paul Weston on the previous night, an interview was going on which was to alter her whole life.

"Those are my terms; take them or leave them. Accept them and I pull you through; refuse and you are ruined!" The speaker, Roger Armer, was a strong hard man; he was Walter Thobury's manager, and the man he faced as he uttered those words was Walter Thobury himself.

Doris's father was a failure; he was weak and lazy, and as he faced his manager he looked frightened. His uncle had died and left him the huge business of Thobury and Co. But he did not trouble himself about the business; he left it all in the hands of Roger Armer. And now he found that he was on the brink of ruin, and only Armer could pull him through, and that he would only do so on one condition, and that was that he should marry Doris. And in his weakness and fear of ruin the crushed man agreed—actually agreed to sacrifice his daughter to save himself.

When he told Doris she was horrified. "Father," she cried, "you are not in earnest. Marry Mr Armer? I couldn't. You can't mean it."

But her father did mean it, and he grovelled on his knees and begged her to save him by the only means she could. At last she cast aside all her hopes for the future and promised. That evening she wrote a short note to Paul Weston telling him she had changed her mind and could never be his wife.

The engagement was announced, and eventually came the fateful wedding day. The service commenced, and at last came the words which she was to repeat: "To love, honour and obey." Could she say them?

"I cannot say those words!" she gasped, and the service came to an abrupt stop as she was led from the altar to the vestry. It was then she realised that the words must be said. They went back to the altar and Doris Thobury became Doris Armer. It was all over and they were driving towards their home before Roger spoke.

"I am your master now," he said as they drove up to the house. "I'll soon teach you obedience, once we are inside those walls."

CHAPTER VI.

HER GILDED CAGE.

Almost before the newly-married couple had entered the house, Doris Armer had pulled herself together.

When she passed into the large hall, where a staff of servants received her, she had banished all traces of the bitter weeping. Love was not for her, but pride remained.

Too well did Doris realise that the latter could never take the place of the former softer emotion. But it was all she had left—the only weapon with which to fight the dark future that lay before her.

As she passed through the stately hall on her way to her own rooms, she was conscious that her husband's eyes followed her. They wore an inscrutable expression, one she could not make out.

She fancied she caught a flash of pity, and this hardened her more than a studied insult would have done.

How dare he pity her! She bore his name; she had forced herself to utter vows at the altar against which her whole soul had revolted; even to the making of a scene which—too well she knew—Roger Armer would never forgive.

Oh! If only she had had the courage to remain in the vestry, and not return to the church! She would be free now.

He had declared himself her master. Well, it was up to her to prevent this.

It was now that Doris Armer made the first and greatest mistake of her married life. Had she gone to Roger Armer, told how unhappy she was, asked him to be gentle with her, hold out a helping hand to lift her out of this Slough of Despond, it is very probable that all would, in time, have gone well.

But pride held her back—that, and some force within her to which she could not give a name.

And so, with head up, her beautiful face pale and determined, she followed the housekeeper—a stately dame in a black silk dress and old lace collar—to the magnificent suite of apartments Mr Armer had prepared for his bride.

Certainly they were superb! Even Doris prejudiced as she was, could not but admit that Roger had carried out his promise of giving her everything the heart of woman could desire from the point of view of luxury.

But, in her present frame of mind, she saw in her beautiful rooms nothing but an over-lavish display of the wealth for which her father had sold her.

In the housekeeper she saw a spy—a gaoler. Had not Mrs Spry been in the Armer family all her life—nursed Roger as an infant?

With intense pride Mrs Spry flung open the massive doors, and stood back respectfully to allow her new mistress to pass in before her.

"I hope you like the rooms, ma'am?" She smiled genially into Doris's cold, pale face. "It's Master Roger's own taste. Every bit of the decoration was done under the master's own eye. I hope you are pleased, ma'am."

"I am not fond of blue," Ellen said coldly, as she went up to the grate, where a fire of logs was burning brightly; for the evening was chill, and, as Mrs Spry remarked, "A good fire was always a welcome home."

The young wife shivered as she looked round at the blue-and-silver draperies—the exquisite pale blue brocade that covered the furniture.

This was her cell, the interior of her gilded prison; and even into this gilded cage her master would have the right to come. She was his wedded wife.

An intense feeling of desolation swept over her. She was obliged to bite her lips hard to prevent herself breaking down before—her gaoler; for so, in her own mind, did she regard poor, inoffensive Mrs Spry.

"Oh, ma'am! Mr Roger will be disappointed! He said blue was your colour—that you had on a blue dress the first day he saw you. He said, too, that, as you were fair, with a complexion of milk and roses—and, indeed," the garrulous dame continued, "he was right there—blue would suit you. I'm sorry you don't like your rooms, ma'am."

There was real distress in the old servant's voice, and for a few moments Doris wondered if she was not just a little unjust and suspicious. Mrs Spry's next words were unfortunate.

"Master said he expected you'd spend most of your time in your own apartments, so he wanted them to be bright and cheerful."

"I am much obliged to Mr Armer for his kind forethought," Doris said freezingly, though her heart sank like lead. "It is kind on his part to make my prison comfortable."

She laughed bitterly—a laugh that held a note of hysteria. And, to tell the truth, Doris Armer's nerves had about reached breaking-point.

Of this show of weakness she was desperately afraid. Her only chance of peace—happiness was out of the question

—lay in holding her own with the man who had bought her.

"Oh, ma'am! Indeed, I'm sure Mr Roger never meant you to feel like that! You're a bit tired with your journey. I'll send tea. And here's your maid, Jenkins. She was maid to Miss Armer, but Master Armer asked his sister to let you have Jenkins, and Miss Armer agreed."

A very panic of anger rushed over Doris. Another gaoler! Another spy! Even in her own rooms she would never be alone!

She had heard Roger speak of his sister Marion, an unmarried woman some years older than himself. He had always alluded to her as a thoroughly capable woman.

Already Doris hated Miss Armer. By a strong effort the bride controlled herself.

Jenkins placed a dainty tea-table near the fire. She was a pleasant-faced woman of about five-and-thirty; but, jaundiced as she now was, Doris saw nothing pleasant in the plain face and homely figure of her new maid.

Everything had been done for her without reference to her own particular tastes! Furniture, colour scheme, attendants—all had been selected by the hand of the man who had declared himself her master.

"I hope you have everything you require, madam?" Jenkins inquired. "At what time would you wish me to dress you? Dinner is served at seven o'clock."

"By whose orders?" Doris inquired sharply.

"By the master's."

"Order it for eight. Seven is too early for me."

Jenkins hesitated.

"The master mentioned seven. Cook had orders for that hour."

"I wish it at eight," Doris said firmly. "I shall not be ready before," she said.

"You will probably wish to wear your wedding dress this evening, madam?"

Jenkins ventured, hoping that this cold, pale bride would assent, and so give them the pleasure of seeing their master's young wife in her wedding finery.

Then, as Mrs Spry had gone, she made an unfortunate remark.

"Master said you would, just to give us servants a treat." She smiled, all unaware of the storm her chance words had raised in her mistress's breast.

"So I'm not even allowed to dress as I choose!" she thought.

"I shall certainly not wear my wedding dress!" she said. "You are at liberty to look at it—show it to your fellow servants—but not on me!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, madam! It wouldn't be a bit the same! You'd look so lovely in white. I've unpacked a pretty evening dress. Shall I put that out for to-night? Brides usually dress in white just at first."

"Brides!" thought the girl bitterly. "Yes, happy brides dressed in white because they were happy, and to please the man they loved beyond all others. But she was not happy, and—she did not love her bridegroom. She could never, never love Roger Armer."

"I shall not wear white. There is a black lace dress. Put it out, and—I shall not require you to dress me. I wish to be alone."

After this very decided rebuff there was nothing left to Jenkins but to retire.

"I can't understand the new mistress," the maid confided to Mrs Spry. "There's no pleasing her. And—I shouldn't say so to anyone but to another old family servant—but it almost looks as though she disliked her husband. But that can't be. No one could dislike such a fine, handsome man as Master Roger."

Mrs Spry had thought much the same thing, but her loyalty prevented her from agreeing with Jenkins.

"She's over-tired," she said. "These big weddings take it out of a girl. You let 'em be, Jenkins; you'll see they'll be like turtle doves before the evening's over."

Had Doris overheard the old dame's prophecy how bitterly she would have laughed.

It was in anything but a turtle-dove frame of mind that she went down the great black and green marble staircase, to join her husband in the big reception room, which had been brilliantly illuminated for the occasion.

Never, thought Roger Armer, had he seen Doris look so beautiful, so dignified

as she did on the first evening of their wedded life.

He frowned as he saw she was dressed in black, though he was obliged to own nothing could have set off the pearly tints of her marvellous skin to more advantage than this soft, clinging black dress she had elected to wear, instead of the white satin he had wished her to don.

It was just possible, he thought, that the sight of her wedding dress would recall the unpleasant scene in the church.

So he tried to find excuses. And though he thought that, at any rate, she need not have chosen a black dress, he made no remark; but, going forward, held out his hand and smiled.

"Rested, I hope, Doris?"

"Yes, thank you."

She went past him, ignoring the outstretched hand. At that particular moment she felt contact with him to be impossible.

"I am glad to hear that," Roger said quietly, though instinctively he felt humiliated by her coldness, "because an old friend called to see me, and I asked her remain to dinner. But if you like I can easily put Isobel Vane off. She will quite understand that we wish to be alone this evening. Indeed, she is waiting to know if she is to remain."

The colour rushed to Doris's face, but she kept silence.

"It is for you to decide, Doris. Miss Vane is not unknown to you. I understand she was a friend of—yours."

"Miss Vane," said Doris coldly, "is but an acquaintance. But I know her to be a friend of yours, so by all means let her remain to dinner."

"I will go and fetch her. She is waiting in the library."

Roger left the room. As soon as the door closed behind him, Doris began to pace the floor. Isobel Vane here! Come to welcome her! What was it she had heard about Miss Vane?

Ah! she had it now! Rumour had linked her name with Mr Armer's. It was said that Isobel Vane had once been very much in love with Roger. But that was not saying Roger had been attracted by Miss Vane. If he had been, he would have married her, and not Doris Thobury.

Doris could not quite account for the little feeling of annoyance she experienced as the minutes went by and her husband did not reappear with their visitor. Evidently she was that most detestable creature, "A dog in the manger."

"I'm glad Isobel is here," she told herself. Her presence will relieve the situation. How I dreaded that long first dinner with my master!"

In this frame of mind she turned to greet her first visitor.

CHAPTER VII.

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS.

The girl—or rather woman—who entered on Roger's arm was certainly a very striking-looking individual. Isobel Vane was not beautiful, like Doris. Her features were too irregular for beauty. But there was such an intense vitality in her face that, in spite of obvious defects, it was generally voted attractive.

She had fine dark eyes, and a wealth of magnificent red hair which was a beauty in itself. Her figure was well developed; her carriage erect if somewhat stiff. As to age, Isobel Vane might have been anything between twenty-five and thirty. Besides her Roger's bride looked little more than a child.

Miss Vane was an adept at concealing her feelings. Therefore she allowed nothing of her surprise to appear in her cordial greeting of her hostess.

"I do call it sweet of you, Mrs Armer, to allow me to see you. I made a mistake in the date of your wedding. I thought it was last week, instead of this one. I feel such an intruder. I'm sure Roger must possibly loathe me, though sending Roger an arch glance—"he's ever so much too polite to say so."

"I assure you, Miss Vane," Doris hastened to say, "I'm absolutely charmed to see you. I know my husband is. Are you not, Roger?"

"Yes, of course, I am. I'm always pleased to see Isobel."

Doris smiled her sweetest. She owed Roger compensation for having humiliated him before the whole congregation that morning. Her chance had come sooner than she had anticipated, and she intended

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