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## THE SILENT WIFE!

Remarkable Drama of Married Life.

By MARK ENGLISH.

## THE FIRST PART.

Doris Thobury, the sister of the childless 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." 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.

Her engagement to Armer was announced, and eventually Doris Thobury became Doris Armer.

She found her husband domineering, and determined to break her proud spirit. She discovered, too, that she had been won by a trick, for her father's business had never been anything but perfectly solvent.

Doris invites Paul Weston, the young doctor to whom she had been engaged, to dinner. When he comes, Roger insults him in front of the other guests, and orders him from the house. In sudden anger, Doris tells him she will never open her lips to him again.

## "BOUGHT AND PAID FOR."

"This unnatural condition of affairs could not go on without a break."

This was what Roger thought; but it seemed as though it would! Doris would not speak. He, in turn, grew to be silent too, though always watching her with furtive suspicion.

Only when guests were present—and they grew fewer and fewer, except Isobel Vane, who seemed always at hand—was there any relief from the strain that had now reached breaking-point.

In these days Doris walked a great deal. Or, if she did not walk, she rode, and always chose The Demon as her mount. Perhaps she felt sympathy with the horse her husband had schooled into obedience.

Be that as it may, she and the beautiful animal were on excellent terms with one another.

One day, during one of her lonely, melancholy rides, she came across Paul Wes-

ton. He, too, was riding, and by one accord they stopped.

Paul was horrified to see the ravages Doris's unnatural life had made in the girl he had once loved and hoped to make his wife.

He had heard rumours of her strange silence—for Isobel had been careful to set gossip going—but that it had reached the pitch it had he would not have believed unless he had heard it from her own lips.

"I'm glad I've met you, Paul," she said, in the frozen tones that had replaced her low, rich ones. "I want to tell you it was all my fault—that night. My husband did tell me to—to write and say he would not receive you—and I disobeyed him. I had no right to do that, had I, Paul? A wife like me must always be obedient to the man who has bought her—at a price."

Paul's face grew grave and troubled. "Don't give it another thought," he told her.

He admired her immensely for her courage in telling him the facts. He would have given much to know what truth there was in the rumours he had heard. He was soon to know!

"From that night to this I have never opened my lips to Roger Armer," she said abruptly—stooping down to pat The Demon's sleek neck, so that he could not see that frozen look upon her face.

But Paul Weston's keen eyes did see it, and his heart ached for the girl who had been so bright and helpful in the little Cottage Hospital, cheering the suffering—a very angel of the wards. How did it come to pass, this ill-matched union? There was something very wrong somewhere.

"You heard me say I would not speak?" "Yes, I heard you. But I—I did not believe it possible that you really meant it."

"Yes—I meant it."

Paul touched the hand that lay upon the horse's neck.

"Doris—such things work madness in the brain. Let me entreat you to let bygones be bygones. I'm sure your husband does not deserve so great a punishment. To me it would be insupportable."

"To you—yes. Because you are good and kind, and understand that a woman is only flesh and blood; that a wife should be a comrade, and not a chattel bought and paid for. Roger is different. He is hard and cruel. Look at The Demon's sides! Those scars are the result of the cruel spurring my husband gave him, across his flanks are the marks of his whip. He would like to serve me, his wife as he has his horse. Only one thing deters him—public opinion. Now you know the manner of man my vows on that day of horror and despair bound me to live with."

Paul was speechless with horror.

"Doris, if you feel like this, leave him! It is better to go than to endure this living death. It will kill you. Write to Miss Dalty. I'm sure she would be glad to have you back, you were always her favourite nurse."

The girl shook her head drearily. "It wouldn't be the same. I am not the same. Something has gone from me here."

She laid her hand across her heart. Just then there came to their ears the purring of a car in the distance. The lane was narrow, the horses fidgety.

"Go now Paul, I'll think over what you say. I'll write to Miss Dalty. It may be I shall find rest in relieving the troubles of others. Only," she sighed deeply, "I'm not sure he'd let me stay. You see, he has bought me."

Paul rode quickly away, his mind full of forebodings.

The car—a tradesman's delivery van—rushed down the lane, almost grazing The Demon, who resented the liberty by rearing straight up. Doris had all she could do to keep her seat.

Again he reared, and would have bolted had not a strong and powerful hand reached up and caught the terrified animal by the curb, bringing him down with tremendous force; and Doris, looking down, saw the grim, determined face of her husband.

"Get down! I am going to give him a lesson—and you too!"

Roger's face was deathly white. His teeth were set. Upon his handsome countenance was an expression that might

well have struck awe into the heart of the wife who defied him.

Had Roger imagined that his words would have drawn a retort from those sealed lips, he was mistaken. She sat her horse immovable.

He reached out his hand, and lifted her from the saddle as though she had been a featherweight. He placed her against a tree, and, taking her place in the saddle galloped The Demon out of sight.

Doris put her hands before her eyes. For one brief moment she thought of speaking; of entreating Roger to spare the horse, whose action had been the outcome of fear.

"No. I will keep my vow." She shuddered, picturing what might be happening to her beloved Demon.

She need not have feared. Could she have seen what was taking place a quarter of a mile off, it is just possible she might have relented.

Roger had dismounted, and with gentle hand was caressing the animal, who knew his master, and feared him far more than he had feared the snorting, noisy car.

"Why should I punish you because you are afraid?" He stroked the velvet muzzle.

"It's only sheer rebellion I want to curb."

His face grew intensely melancholy, and then it hardened.

"She has disobeyed me—defied me! She has met the one man of all others I have forbidden her to speak to. Let her take the consequences."

He led The Demon back, and placing Doris in the saddle, led the horse homewards.

"You have met Paul Weston," Roger said sternly. "Be prepared to take a motor journey this evening. I am going to be master in my own house. Go to your rooms—now!"

Slowly Doris Armer ascended the stairs, and when she reached her own rooms, locked the door. Then she sat down, and broke into the bitterest weeping that she had given way to since the day she had entered her proud home.

What did it matter where he took her? One prison was as good as another—to Doris Armer.

## THE LONELY HOUSE IN THE WOODS.

"Send Mrs Armer's maid to me."

Jenkins entered the study. Her master sat at the table, an expression on his face which the girl later on described as "making my blood run cold."

"I wish you to pack Mrs Armer's clothes. She is going away this evening."

Now, as this was the first the servants had heard of their mistress going visiting—for so they supposed the order to mean—she naturally looked surprised.

"Madam has not given any orders, sir," she ventured rashly.

"I give you the order." He frowned.

"Yes, sir, of course. Am I to go with madam?"

"No."

"What amount of luggage shall I prepare, sir?"

"As small an amount as possible, compatible with comfort. Pack plenty of warm clothes. No evening dresses. Where Mrs Armer is going—they do not wear evening-dress." The grimness on Armer's face was terrible.

Roger had felt unable to bear the situation another hour. He had now decided on taking a step from which he had hitherto shrunk. He would isolate this silent wife of his, make her in reality the prisoner she believed herself to be.

His complex nature was at war. One minute he hated her, the next she was the dearest thing on earth to him. His longing to crush her to his breast at times was unbearable, at others he could have killed her.

"Tell Mrs Armer I wish to see her. Meanwhile, start packing. We leave in an hour."

He sat brooding. There came the rustle of a woman's gown, and his silent wife stood before him, her slim white hands folded lightly in front of her.

"Once more I ask you to speak," he said.

Her lips folded more closely.

"You don't intend to obey me?" "I will no reply. Very well. You will be ready to take a motor drive with me in an hour's time."

Doris turned and left the room.

It was dark when the car, driven by Roger Armer, drew up at the entrance to the Court. In the hall stood Doris. Her maid stood beside her, her mistress's travelling bag in her hand. The remainder of the luggage was already in the car.

Doris Armer came quietly down the marble steps. Her husband opened the door of the car, and she got in.

Roger had half expected a scene, but there was none, nothing but that dead silence, which he was determined to break at any cost.

The car sped through the darkness, Roger at the wheel. Doris, inside, lay back among the cushions, her eyes closed, her face mask-like and cold.

What did it matter to her where Roger took her? A prison is a prison, no matter where it is situated.

How long they had been travelling she did not know or care. She had sunk into an apathetic condition, when the senses are lulled, the brain semi-dormant.

From this half-conscious state she was awakened by a violent jolt. The car seemed to stand still for a moment. Then, to her horror, it began to move swiftly forward, gathering speed at it went.

Rising from her seat, Doris gazed through the window. The figure in the fur-coat was still at the wheel, but that he had practically lost control over the powerful car was evident to the least experienced.

As the full horror of the situation burst upon the girl she put her hands before her face, and crouched back in her seat. A prayer that they might be saved broke from her pale lips, and, strange to say, her thoughts at that moment were more for Roger than herself.

"Was it possible,"—the thought flashed lightning-like, through her mind—"that she cared for this man who had insulted and outraged her as Armer had done! At they met their end, it would be together. The frozen silence must be broken—now."

Her hand went out to the window in front. It caught the strap. Her lips opened. Her husband's name "Roger" was on her lips when, as suddenly as the car had started, so it slowed down. Roger had it under control again. The danger was past.

The car came to a standstill. Doris sank back on her cushions, more unnerved than she cared to show. She heard the door handle turn. Roger's face—white and drawn as one who had faced a great peril—appeared.

"Thank Heaven, Doris, you are safe—that you did not attempt to jump out!" He waited a minute. "We have nearly reached our destination," he said briefly.

He closed the door, and set the engine going. The car moved slowly on. For about three minutes it ran smoothly, then stopped before a high wall.

By the light of the powerful lamps Doris saw a tall, narrow doorway. On every side were trees, tall, gloomy firs and pines.

The house she could not see. She concluded it was hidden by the denseness of the woods. She could not repress a shiver as Roger opened the door and assisted her out.

He took her dumbly, and with a key which he took from his pocket he unlocked the door in the wall. By the light of a torch, he guided her across a courtyard overgrown with rank grass and weeds.

The air was chill, the atmosphere was like a tomb. The prospect on which Doris' wide eyes rested was about as cheerful. All she could see of her future home was a large square, stone house, like the courtyard, overgrown with moss.

With another key, Armer unlocked the door. A woman came quickly forward. "I hope," said Roger, "everything is ready for—the lady's reception?"

Doris glanced quickly up. "I think you will find all in order, sir," the woman replied respectfully.

"Please come this way, madam. You will no doubt be glad of tea."

With a firm but not ungentle touch, the woman, who wore a kind of nurse's uniform, took hold of Doris' arm.

"Thank you," said the girl haughtily. "I am quite able to go alone. I have not been ill. I require no assistance from you."