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She walked across the hall. It was cold and cheerless, like the outside. She turned, in time to see a strangely meaning glance pass between her husband and the elderly woman with the hard, fierce countenance.

What did it all mean? Where was she? Why did they treat her like this?

"My name is Merton—Nurse Merton," her guide said, as she threw open a door on the upper landing. "I hope you will find all as you wish. Mr Ross was most particular that you should be comfortable and happy."

A bitter laugh broke from Doris. Happy? And why did they call her husband by another name than his own?

"My name," she said coldly, "is Mrs Armer."

Again she caught a meaning look pass between her husband and Nurse Merton.

"Yes—yes. Of course it is." The woman spoke soothingly. "And now, sir, if you won't take tea, perhaps you would go. I should like to begin my—treatment as soon as possible."

Low though the words were spoken, they reached Doris Armer's ears. Treatment! Mystery upon mystery!

And then in a flash it came to her. This woman believed her to be mad! She—who was as sane as any of them!

A dull sensation of despair crept over her in her husband's power. She had her, as she realised how absolutely she defied him, and he intended she would pay the penalty.

"Yes. I see you have everything in order. I will call again as soon as possible. In the meantime, let me know how the—treatment succeeds."

He muttered:

"Good-bye, Doris." And then suddenly he asked Nurse Merton to leave them alone for a minute.

"Will you speak? For the last time, will you break this intolerable silence?" She looked at him, her exquisite face white as marble, and as unresponsive. "Then on your own head be all that will undoubtedly happen. In this house, far from the world, you will remain. To those who will attend on you—you are mad. You will be treated as insane. Good-bye!"

He was gone. She heard the front door, and then the gate, close behind him. Nurse Merton came, and with quiet persistence induced her to go to her own room. Then she left her, locking the door behind her.

After all, Doris was not unwilling to be alone. Her little suite consisted of a bed and sitting-room, opening off one another.

They were prettily and cheerfully furnished. Chintz coverings and hangings banished, in a measure, the sombreness of the panels and ceilings.

"If only I knew where I was!"

Doris beat her hands one against the other. She pulled aside the curtains. She could see nothing. It was pitch dark outside. Only a wind had arisen, and the trees whispered to each other.

She took off her walking things, put on a warm wrapper, and sat down by the fire to nurse her gloomy thoughts.

Then a strange thing happened. She thought she heard a slight noise; and, turning round, to her astonishment she saw one of the oak panels slide slowly back.

She held her breath as a man quietly slipped down into the room.

A MAN OF MYSTERY.

Doris's amazement at this unexpected invasion of her privacy was unbounded. She stared at the man, whilst the man returned her stare with interest. It was quite evident that he was utterly surprised to find the room occupied.

A heavy muffler hid the lower part of his face; a slouch hat pulled down over his face; a slouch hat pulled well down over his face added to the disguise.

"Who are you? And how do you come to be here?" he demanded roughly. "Are you a spy? If so—" His hand went to his hip pocket with a gesture which could mean one thing only.

But Doris did not flinch. Not by so much as the flicker of an eyelid did she show fear.

"I do not know what you mean," she said coldly. "I did not even know of that secret entrance." She pointed to the panel, which the intruder had not slid back into position, but had left open, showing a yawning chasm.

"You swear that?" His attitude was menacing, his hand still remained in his hip pocket.

"There is no need to swear. I give you my word of honour that I know nothing about this house. I only came here a few hours ago."

The man, whom Doris now saw had pale eyes and a bearded face, came up to her, and looked steadily at her.

"I wonder if I can believe you?" he muttered.

His voice was cultivated—that of an educated man. Very quietly she replied.

"I assure you you can."

Again he muttered:

"I wonder?" And turning quickly closed the panel.

Doris Armer's heart began to thump, and small wonder if it did! Up to the present, by reason of her declaration of silence, her existence had been one of dreary monotony. Now it threatened to be full of incident.

Alone in a room with a strange man who had suddenly appeared before her, a burglar, or desperado, in a house the very name of which she had never heard—a supposed lunatic imprisoned by her husband's orders—surely the situation might well have terrified a defenceless woman.

But Doris felt no fear, not in the ordinary acceptance of the term. She had gone through so much that her senses had become numb.

And well for her, in this crisis, that this was so. Had she shown abject fear, screamed for aid or resorted to the usual means of summoning help, there is no knowing what might have been her fate.

"You're a good plucked 'un, and no mistake!" There was a note of reluctant admiration in the man's voice, and he withdrew his hand from his pocket. "Aren't you afraid?"

Doris shrugged her shoulders.

"Not particularly," she said coolly. "I do not suppose you will shoot me. Firearms make quite a loud noise. My attendant would come running to see what's the matter. I am a prisoner."

"A prisoner! Who has imprisoned you?"

The man's tone had altered in an extraordinary manner. It betrayed the deepest interest. It seemed as if he had forgotten the object of his visit—whatever it was—in contemplation of the beautiful young woman who stood calmly meeting his gaze.

"Does it matter?" she said.

"To me—a great deal."

Certainly this was an extraordinary reply, and Doris stared—as well she might. She had never seen the man before, and yet he appeared to take an intense interest in her.

"That can hardly be," she said quietly, "since you don't even know my name."

The fact that she asked no questions of him seemed to surprise the intruder.

"Shall I guess it?" he said, after a long pause.

"If you like. I do not think you will succeed, though."

"I'm not so sure."

Again a long pause, during which the man's eyes never left the lovely face, on which was the imprint of deep suffering. "You are Mrs Roger Armer—the Silent Wife!"

Now indeed was Doris Armer's interest aroused.

"How on earth did you know?"

The man laughed.

"There is very little we don't know. It is our business to know most things—particularly about Roger Armer."

There was a sinister note in his voice that did not escape Doris.

"But why about him?"

Again the man laughed—this time grimly.

"Trade secrets, lady—business secrets. secrets that must never be told!" And then suddenly: "Would you like to escape from this prison of yours?"

"Yes!" She drew an eager breath.

"Then you shall. But not to-night—'t would be too risky. Be ready to go to-morrow at this hour. I will arrange everything. Leave all to me."

Before she could utter a word or ask a single question, the man went towards the panel.

It slid back. Lightly as an acrobat he leapt upwards. The panel closed noiselessly behind him. Doris stood in the centre of the room.

Was it a delusion after all? Had her brain indeed given way, as it was supposed to have done? Had she fallen asleep over the fire, and dreamed a remarkably vivid dream? No, she could not believe that.

She crossed to the spot where the stranger had appeared and disappeared so mysteriously. She ran her hand along the worm-eaten oak panelling, and found it stronger than it looked. No sign that this particular panel was in any way different from the others was apparent.

She stirred the fire into a blaze, and sat down to think. Suppose she trusted to this stranger to release her from her prison? What might the result be?

It was a risky and dangerous proceeding to trust herself in the hands of a man virtually unknown to her.

And yet that way lay freedom. By going, and leaving no trace behind her, she could escape a far worse fate than any the future could probably hold for her.

That Roger would seek her far and wide she knew well. He would not be balked of his vengeance. Yet she need never see him again. She would never see him again.

(Continued on page 4.)

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