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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." 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. At last finding his threats of no avail, and that she has become a "silent wife," he takes her to a house in the middle of a lonely wood, and leaves her there in the charge of a nurse, whom he tells she is mad.

When Doris is thinking over her terrible situation in her room a sliding panel opens

and a man appears, who is willing to help her to escape.

"HE WOULD TAKE HER IN HIS ARMS AND KISS HER."

Isobel Vane came upon Armer as he strolled moodily up and down the garden of Westways Court. His thoughts were far from being enviable ones. The drastic steps he had taken to force Doris to speak filled him with disgust of himself.

And yet, he argued, what else could he do? He could not lose her. By a lie he had gained her—by force he would keep her.

Yet he felt how futile was the course he had taken. The girl he had married had as strong a will as his own; the proud spirit would not easily be broken.

If this last treatment failed, there seemed nothing left to him but to open the door of her cage and let his wild, beautiful bird escape.

To-night he would go to her. He would not plead in words. He would try another method. He would take her in his arms—plead for pardon for the lie he had told to her—tell her that it was love that had driven him to such a mean action.

He would hold her, never let her go until she whispered her forgiveness.

And then these softer, saner thoughts were thrust aside by the image of Paul Weston. Before his mental vision there arose the picture of Doris sitting on the the Demon, Paul's eyes fixed upon her face.

"She is too good to ignore her marriage vows," he thought bitterly. "She may not, does not, love me; but there is no other man in her life. She would not allow it, but she cannot help her thoughts. She would have been happy with Weston but for me."

It was in this frame of mind that Isobel found the man she had never ceased to love.

"Roger," she said, in a low tender voice, "is it true that Doris has left you?"

He swung round upon her, his face hard, his eyes stern with misery.

"No, it is not true."

Isobel ventured to put her hand on his sleeve. Coldly, he drew his arm away.

Isobel bit her lip with annoyance. How impossible Roger had become since he had married Doris!

"Don't be angry with me. But people will talk, Roger. It's all over the place that Mrs Armer left the Court, taking luggage with her. Roger, dear"—she dropped her voice to a cooing whisper—"we used to be such pals! I want to help you. Won't you let me do anything I can?"

Roger's ill temper vanished beneath the undeniable charm of the woman. After all, why should he visit his ill humour on this old friend, who offered help and gave him sympathy?

"Forgive me, Isobel. You touched me on the raw. I'm very sore, you know."

"And no wonder," Isobel sighed effectively. "Doris acted in an unpardonable manner at your dinner. But, of course, she didn't mean what she said. No sane woman could live under the same roof with her husband, and never speak. The thing's impossible. It's only servants' gossip I've heard."

"What have you heard?"

"That she will not speak—never has spoken since that night? Oh, Roger, how I felt for you! You, who have given her everything a woman could possibly want. Tell me it isn't true."

"It is true—every word of it," said Roger sternly. "But it can't go on. Doris is not at home, but I know where she is, and to-night I am going to her—" He broke off, his face working with emotion.

Isobel watched him furtively. She was wondering where Doris was.

"I am going to tell her I love her, that there is no sacrifice I won't make to win a word from her."

Isobel's face changed. It grew hard and relentless. This was not in the least what she wanted.

"And, what of your pride, Roger? Are you going to allow your wife to triumph, to be able to throw it in your face that she got the better of you? I didn't think you were that sort, Roger. You are a man to command, not to obey. In the city you are a power. Many strong men fear you; not one of your employees dare disobey you. And yet you are as wax in the hands of a woman!"

Her speech stung. She had indeed touched Roger Armer on the raw. Pride, love of power, had ever been the great financier's failing. Every word Isobel had uttered was true.

Isobel, watching his face, saw that her words had gone home, and left it at that. She persuaded him to accompany her to her cottage, and lunch with her and the old maiden aunt with whom she lived.

She did not make the mistake of appearing curious about Doris. She had sowed the seed, and could afford to wait for the harvest.

When Roger left Rose Cottage he felt strangely rested, his self-respect restored, whilst his pride was soothed by Isobel's subtle flattery.

If only Doris was like Isobel, he thought, as his car rushed him up to London, where he had to keep an important appointment.

He intended to dine at his club, and go straight to the lonely house in the woods. He would send his chauffeur back by train, and drive himself.

How the long hours passed to Doris she could never afterwards tell. Nurse Merton served her meals daintily in her pretty sitting-room, all unconscious of the secret the panelled walls concealed. Doris's attendant addressed her patient as Mrs Ross.

"She's not a bit of trouble," she told her niece, "and as sane as you are except for her delusion about her husband. She thinks she's someone of the name of Armer, and she won't speak to him. We'll get her all right in time. If we can't I shall tell Mr Ross I can't undertake the responsibility alone. He'll have to put her in a properly registered asylum. Only I want our passage money to Australia, I wouldn't ha' taken on the job at all."

"Mr Ross pays you well, aunt?"

"Rather! I'm to have a hundred pounds

anyhow—two, if I can get her to speak to him."

"D'ye think you will?" Nellie Merton asked curiously.

"I don't think so. She's one of the obstinate sort, is Mrs Ross."

"Couldn't you get her back up, so as she would nag at him when he comes?"

Mrs Merton shook her head.

"She ain't the naggin' sort, worse luck!"

All day, on and off, Nurse Merton did her utmost to get at the bottom of Mrs Ross's mind. In vain! Doris's thoughts were her own, if nothing else was.

At last the hour struck when she might expect her husband. A horrible dread came to her. Suppose, whilst she and Roger were together, the mysterious visitor should appear?

And then, as she recalled the man's sinister allusion to Roger Armer, she felt a quail of fear—not for herself, but for her husband. What if her freedom should mean danger to him? If this should be so she could never forgive herself.

Then the longing for freedom, for a way out of her difficulty, swamped every other sensation.

As the hour named for her release by the mysterious stranger approached, the girl could scarcely restrain her excitement. She had packed in a small bag her little stock of ready money—a few paltry shillings.

She had brought no jewels. Her engagement and the wedding ring upon her finger comprised her stock of jewellery. Roger had forbidden Jenkins to pack her mistress's jewel-case.

As soon as she was free, Doris realised that she would have to work—and work

hard. She was very strong, and would be certain to get employment. Under another name she would hide her disastrous marriage.

A lonely life for a girl but little over twenty; but it had no terrors for a girl who knew what loneliness meant.

At ten o'clock Doris rang the bell for her jailer, for so she not unreasonably regarded Mrs Merton. When the nurse appeared, she said carelessly:

"I do not think Mr Ross will come this evening; and, if he does, ask him not to disturb me. I have nothing to say to him."

Resolutely she beat down her excitement. Were she to show the slightest symptom of uneasiness, the nurse might insist on remaining with her.

"I can't think why Mr Ross has not come. But I agree with you, Mrs Ross, I don't think he will come to-night. Have you everything you require, madam?"

"Yes, thank you. You can lock me in. And oh, hadn't you better see that the screws in the sash are quite secure?"

Nurse Merton looked surprised, as well she might; but, thinking it was a bit of dreary fun on her patient's part, humouring her by obeying her strange request.

"You will have your joke, Mrs Ross," she laughed jovially. "We have to keep screws in, or the windows would rattle like anything."

Doris only smiled.

Mrs Merton went out, and Doris heard the key very gently turned, and the nurse's foot descend the stairs.

Quickly she put on her warm coat over her coat and skirt, tied a veil round her hat, and, with her bag at her feet, sat down to await the summons.

In ten minutes she saw the panel slide back, and the stranger dropped, as before, to the ground.

"Quick!" he said breathlessly. "We have no time to lose. Give me your bag." He tossed it into the dark chasm. And now you must trust yourself to me. It might give our secret away."

And then, as he paused, bewildered by the man's impetuosity, he added:

"You can trust me. Really you can."

Upon this assurance she surrendered herself to his strong arm, and was swung up into what appeared to her illimitable space and total darkness.

She heard the panel slide back. The man clutched her arm, and dropped down at her side.

"Huh! Not a moment too soon! Not a word, as you value your life!"

She remained perfectly still. The murmur of voices, dim at first and then clearer, came distinctly to her ears.

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

Greatly to Armer's annoyance he was detained in town. The big city magnate with whom he had a stupendous deal on, insisted on dining with him. He could not very well tell his guest to go.

Roger was quite determined to visit the Grange that night. His whole being was hungry for Doris, his soul was crying out for her. As he sent his car rushing along the quiet lanes he pictured her as he had last seen her—pale and determined with her beautiful lips tightly closed.

But to-night she would speak—to-night he would try what love would do to make those soft lips unclose. His kisses should be the key that would unlock those gates of silence.

As he entered the gardens he glanced up at the window of the room he had selected for Doris's prison. Well, he had come to release her.

No matter how she received his offer to let bygones be bygones, he intended to take her home with him that night.

In the car was an extra warm rug. He pictured himself wrapping her in the cosy folds, his face close to hers, the perfume of her beautiful hair intoxicating his senses.

He had his own latchkey, and used it. The hall was dark, everything extraordinarily quiet, but no hint that anything was amiss came to warn him. He made his

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