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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 will you be my wife?" She looked at him steadily 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.

Paul Weston, a young doctor and her former lover, with whom she had been forced to break her engagement. He obtains for her a post as a nurse at a private house, which she thankfully accepts.

A few days after, she reads in the paper that the "missing Mrs Armer" has been found drowned, but actually the unrecognisable body that was discovered belonged to an unknown girl to whom Doris had given her clothes.

Then one day a new housekeeper arrived at Mr Farr's house, and Doris was horrified to recognise in her one of her thief-husband's accomplices.

One day Mr Farr's house is burgled and Doris, recognising her husband's work in this, rushes off to her old home to warn him. From the garden, she sees

the figures of Armer and Isobel Vane silhouetted on the blind.

Then one day Mrs Vanderdecken, the owner of a famous pearl necklace, is invited to dinner.

Roger who is there, manages to steal it and in the excitement passes from the house, and is soon in a train speeding away from the scene of his theft.

Meanwhile Doris, who knows that he is the thief, bicycles over to Westways Court to warn him that a celebrated detective is on his track. She arrives at the lodge gates to discover he has had a motor accident, and that Isobel Vane is nursing him.

"ROGER, ROGER! I'M HERE!"

She paused. A deadly faintness came over her as she recalled the character of the man whom she now knew she loved better than all the world.

A thief of the worst description—a man who set all the laws of God and man to defiance!

Well, it didn't matter what Roger Armer was. She loved him!

Any moment, too, the police might come. Sick, helpless, Roger would be at their mercy. He could not defend himself. Was it in her power to do so?

She didn't know. Her mind was in a whirl. All she knew was she must be beside him—that no power on earth should prevent her taking her rightful place beside her husband's bed.

Mrs Beasley had re-entered the lodge and shut the door. No one saw the slender figure flit up between the trees. The front door was shut, probably bolted. No use to try that.

But on the upper landing, leading to the veranda that ran round her own rooms, Doris noticed an open window.

With swift, unfaltering steps, she ran lightly up the staircase, and, crouching down, gazed into the well-remembered room. Except for the fact that the arrangement of the furniture was different, it was exactly the same as on the day she had left it—as she thought, for ever.

No one was in the room, though several electric lights were still on.

It was an easy matter to slip in and gain the corridor that led to Armer's room. The door of his was ajar.

"I won't be five minutes, Miss Vane," she said. "The water should be hot by now."

She waddled away.

"Well, be quick," Isobel said. "I'm afraid to be left alone. He looks awful!"

Doris went boldly forward, and entered the sick room.

"I am not afraid, Miss Vane, she said quietly. "I will relieve you of further attendance on Mr Armer. I am his wife."

Isobel started so violently that she almost dropped the bandage she was clumsily rolling.

But it was not on Isobel Vane that Doris's eyes rested. It was on the still form, the face of which was almost hidden by medical bandages. She dropped on her knees beside the bed.

"Roger! Roger! I'm here! I'll never leave you again. No matter what happens, I'll stand by you, my dearest!"

"YOU MUST REMAIN DEAD."

Doris's passionate appeal to Roger Armer fell on deaf ears. His eyes remained closed to the anguish face that bent over him as he lay upon the pillow.

"Roger! I'm here—beside you! Fear wife—Doris! I'm not dead, as you imagined, I'm with you. This is my hand on your forehead"—she laid her cool hand on the pallid brow—"my lips that touch yours." She pressed her warm lips to those unresponsive ones. "I've come to be with you, and nurse you back to life. I'll never leave you again, Roger! I'll save you, too, my dearest!"

By this time Isobel had recovered from her amazement.

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Mrs Armer!" she said, in a hard voice that shook with anger. "I don't know by what trick you made everyone—Roger included—believe you to be dead, but you succeeded only too well. And so you must remain dead! You are not wanted here. I am in charge of the sick room, and I must ask you to leave it!"

Doris rose from her knees, and faced her enemy.

"It is my right to be here, and I remain. It is for you to leave this house, not me!"

"I decline to leave it," retorted Isobel Vane. "It was by Roger's express wish I and my aunt left our cottage, and came to the Court. Roger doesn't want you, and I don't wonder! Your sullen temper, your silence, made life unbearable to Roger Armer. It is not likely that, should he recover—which is unlikely—"

Doris went whiter than ever. The expression of agony on the lovely face would have touched most people. But not Isobel. She rejoiced that she was able to cut her rival to the heart.

"He will never want to see you again," she went on bitterly. "If you had not appeared again, one day he would have married me. Were you not satisfied with making his life wretched all those months of silence, without wanting to ruin it for ever?"

The cruel, lying words, as Isobel well knew, stung the young wife like a whip. There was just sufficient truth in them to make Doris wince.

Her vow of silence had set up the barrier, crushed the little seed of love that, unknown to herself, had taken root in her heart. But on barren soil it had lived and thriven, until it had grown to be part of herself.

"Is this true?" she asked.

"Yes, it is true," Isobel said. "Roger always cared for me. What madness induced him to make you his wife, Heaven only knows! He has bitterly repented his folly ever since the time you disgraced him at the wedding ceremony. Why should he love you? He has no reason to love you, nothing to thank you for. And when the news of your supposed death came, I tell you he was glad—glad! 'I am free!' he said. 'Free once more! My life is still before me, unfettered by a woman I could never love, a cold, silent woman who disgraced me!'"

"Is that what he said?" Doris put out her hand, and steadied herself against the bed rail.

Isobel spoke in a low, hissing whisper; Doris's clear tones were also subdued. The man on the bed knew nothing of the fight that was going on so near him—the unequal fight that must end in defeat for the weaker of the combatants.

And love made Doris weak—lamentably, deplorably weak.

"Is it true he said that?"

"Is it true he said that?"

For just a moment Isobel Vane hesitated to deal the final blow; but only for a moment.

"Yes, he said that—and more. I will spare you as much as I can, for once you were his wife—"

Here Isobel made a fatal mistake.

"I am his wife!" Doris's pride was roused. Her spirit, that dauntless spirit that had helped her through so many trials, rose in revolt. "I am his wife," she repeated, "and until Roger Armer bids me to leave the house, I stay!"

Going quietly from the room, she sought the housekeeper. Like Isobel, she was tremendously amazed at seeing the mistress they had all believed dead, standing quietly before her.

"Is it a ghost?" She sank into a chair, trembling violently.

"No, Mrs Spry. It was all a mistake. One day—if the master wishes—you shall be told how it all came about. In the meantime, I am going to remain here."

Then she went back to Isobel.

"I am taking up my place here," she said quietly. "I am very much obliged to you for anything you have done for my husband, but I must ask you to relinquish

your position of mistress in this house. I shall be delighted for you and your aunt to remain as our guests."

Isobel lost her temper. She literally choked with rage.

"I won't remain a day in your house!" she said. "Only wait till Roger regains consciousness. It will be you who will go then!"

"I shall be quite ready to obey my husband's wishes," Doris said coldly.

"Oh, ho! So you're going to play the model wife as a change from the silent one!" sneered Isobel.

Doris did not take up the challenge.

The undignified scene was cut short. Doris re-entered her husband's room and closed the door.

Every movement in the house startled her, for she thought it might be the police, coming to question her about the robberies. She was sure that Mark Lewis suspected that she was shielding someone.

Suppose they arrested her, and put her in prison! She would be powerless to help Roger then.

Of course, he had met with this accident on his way home from Mr Farr's.

She wondered what had become of Mrs Vanderdecken's necklace. Was it in Roger's possession, or had he managed to pass it on to one of the gang? In this miserable state of apprehension she remained till Dr Weston arrived.

His amazement at seeing Doris seated beside his patient, instead of Isobel Vane, can be easily imagined.

"Doris!" he cried. "How did you come here? Is it prudent?"

She looked at him with her beautiful, haggard eyes. His heart ached for the girl he had once hoped to make his wife.

"I had to," she said simply. "He is in danger."

He strove to cheer her.

"Oh, you mustn't despair. He certainly is in a serious condition, but it is by no means hopeless."

"I wasn't thinking of Roger's injuries though, Heaven knows, they seem bad enough."

Paul looked at her closely, but he made no remark. This was not the time to force confidences. He was ready to hear all Doris had to tell him, to sympathise, advise and help her to the best of his ability; but he was willing to await her pleasure.

He thought it a mistake, coming to her old home like this. But he reflected that she had the right to nurse Roger Armer. She was his wife.

"Have you brought a nurse?" she asked, and he wondered how she knew one was expected.

"No, I'm sorry. The nurse I hoped to engage was suddenly called away to a case in my absence."

"I am glad, for now I can nurse him alone. If only I could get him away from here! It is not safe for him to remain at the Court."

"Not safe?"

"No, Paul, I can't explain everything. I've told you as much as I dare. If you knew all you would understand—"

She broke off, unable to go further. He took her hand, and gazed gravely down into the beautiful, troubled face.

"I think," he said slowly, "that, in a measure, I do understand—now."

She sighed restlessly, and then murmured half-unconsciously:

"If only I could get him away from here! If only I could hide him away safely, where they couldn't find him! Just he and I—alone together!"

Paul Weston, not having the key to the situation, imagined her anxiety to get her husband away from Westways Court was due to her very natural jealousy of Isobel Vane.

Most certainly the young wife was placed in an extraordinary position. Believed by husband and friends to be dead, she was yet alive, a living, loving, emotional woman!

And oh, how he pitied this victim of an unhappy marriage. Yes, he would help her to the utmost of his power, in any way possible.

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