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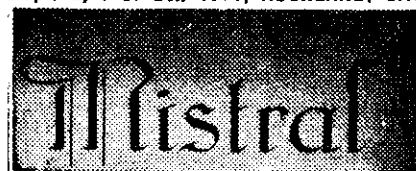
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# IT MUSTN'T HAPPEN AGAIN

## A SHORT STORY

Written for "The Listener"

by AUDREY B. KING

THE day was fine. The house was clean. The children were behaving themselves very well.

She walked up and down the room, moving vases, flicking invisible dust from polished surfaces, rearranging flowers. Of course it was silly to be feeling like this. Of course it was silly. . . .

She pulled aside the frilled curtain and peered into the garden. It was all so tidy, so clipped looking, as though it had just been through the barber's hands. Perhaps she'd overdone this perfection and he would hate it all. Perhaps he'd have liked it untidy with a lived-in look and she was all wrong in her new frock and the smart hair-do. If only she knew what he would be like.

She made herself sit down in a chair. Slowly and deliberately she lit a cigarette, then with a glance at her watch she settled back and tried to collect the racing fragmentary thoughts.

Mark was coming back after four years of war. He'd been through most of it, and had said so little in his letters. They were disjointed and badly written, but then he'd warned her and she'd known he couldn't express himself. There had come a time in the four-year period when she'd been writing to a stranger who sent her letters that told her nothing. She'd protested. Can't you put something of yourself down for me? Can't you tell me about YOU. But he hadn't answered that letter for ages, and then he'd said rather lamely there isn't anything to tell about me. I'm just the same.

SHE looked at her watch. Only a minute had passed. There had been Crete. Wonderful that he'd come through that. Elspeth had had letters from Tom. It just rained hell and brimstone. Wherever you looked those fiends were falling, pouring death from their guns before their feet touched the ground. It was like a bloody nightmare. So few of us got through, but some of us did.

Mark had been through that. He had said it was pretty awful, but thank God it's behind us. He couldn't dramatise. Not that Crete needed dramatising.

Another minute had crawled past.

He hadn't seen their youngest child, who was nearly four. Great little beggar he looks in the snaps. And when Paula went to school he hoped she'd behave herself. There was nothing, nothing to grip. Nothing in those scribbled sheets to tell her that Mark had written, the man whom she'd married seven years ago, the man who was the father of her children, who, so the belief went, was flesh of her flesh. There was just a man writing dull little notes, sending parcels occasionally, thanking her for the cake or the toothbrush or the soap. . . .

Another minute.

His photograph was on the table beside her. She picked it up and looked



"Of course. This was Mark. He liked to wash."

searchingly into the steady eyes. They were grey. Humorous eyes with little lines fanning out from the corners. His mouth was firm and attractive. He wasn't good-looking in the accepted perfect-profile way, but he had a sort of rough good look that appealed to most women. He was popular with women, but he didn't care much about that. He was simple. Intelligent enough, goodness knows, but his beliefs, his expectation of life was simple. Three feeds a day and a roof over my head and you and the kids healthy.

Why had she married him? They played tennis together, went tramping together, swam together. They were very young and thinking didn't matter very much. You just went from day to day having what fun you could, then one day you got married and went on having fun till the first baby came. Then you became domesticated and fussy and insufferably proud of your achievement. Mark had been quite a good father. He brought home ridiculous toys that the poor baby couldn't see, and was hurt when they were left lying about. Pegs were so much more interesting to a child of eight months.

She had nearly filled in five minutes.

Once she'd said to him what do you think the world will be like after the war and he'd said just the same. But why? It can't go on being the same, she'd cried, impatient with his apathy. Well, how are you going to change things? The same old crowd are in charge. What are rats and mice like us going to do about it? What? Perhaps after four years' war he'd have an answer for her. When she told him of the struggle she'd had with sickness, with bills that had to be met and the cost of things rising. Ordinary things like socks and singlets and stuff for boy's trousers. Perhaps when she explained about the time she was ill and couldn't get a soul to help her, when they'd gone a whole day with only milk in the house and no means of getting anything else. Perhaps he'd begin to think. But he'd been through Crete. . . .

All this somehow was impersonal. All this didn't touch him or tell her what he was like. He read travel books. He

disliked detective novels. He didn't like meat cooked twice, and he was very fond of gingerbread. How silly. And when they did the dishes he always washed. I like washing. Yes and so do I. I'm sick of walking backwards and forwards from the bench to the cupboards with a damp towel. I want to get into the hot water too. Yes, but I like washing.

It was time for her to dress the children. She called them in from the garden, washed their red excited faces, controlled her temper when they persisted in slopping water over the bathroom floor and answered interminable questions about Daddy. It wouldn't be so hard with these two overflowing with conversation. Perhaps that would be the best way to tackle the thing. Just sit back and smile whenever he looked at her and for the rest let the kiddies take care of it. She thought he'd like that.

She got the car out of the garage, put the two children in the back, took one last look at her reflection in the mirror and started off. Would he be pleased she'd kept the car? It'd been foolish but she'd wanted something hard like that to strive for. To show him how she'd tried. . . .

She must stop thinking, stop listening to the pounding of her heart, stop wondering whether she'd aged, whether she looked her best, whether he still liked her. . . .

THERE were so many people, and tears and laughter. It was all sad. It was terrible and exciting. There were bronzed men kissing old ladies and giggling girls and teary wives. Clamouring children and crying children and shy children clinging to their mother's skirts. There was the usual Wellington wind and women clutching their absurd hats and hair blowing into tear-filled eyes and newspapers floating, then sweeping up with a gust to the telegraph wires overhead. And there was Mark.

Hullo sweetheart he said and kissed her a little shyly. That's how it would be with Mark with all those people around him. Then he picked up the boy and said hullo son, and kissed the girl

(continued on next page)