



A SHORT
STORY
(Written for
"The Listener"
by
HELEN
WILMOT

"Your husband . . . will be arriving very shortly from overseas. You will be advised later confirming his arrival and future movements.—Defence."

SO that wonderful moment—the moment she would see her husband again—had almost come after four years of waiting. And instead of being overwhelmingly thrilled she was nearly sick with fright. Ever since she had received the letter from Base Records some three or four weeks before saying that her husband was on the way home she had been in a flat spin. A thousand questions chased through her mind. Now that the biggest question of all had been answered—the question of whether she would be a wife or a war widow—she was free to think of all the other aspects. Would he have changed much, would he look different? You couldn't tell much from letters, after all he had been a prisoner-of-war the last few years, and the scrappy little communications they had been able to send each other were not like a regular correspondence and exchange of thoughts. He had been through so much, and yet, so had she. She was a mother now, with a small daughter aged three and a-half who had never seen her father. A daughter with a complete personality all her own; how would she take to a strange man called Daddy? And apart from being a mother, she was no longer a young bride, she was a woman, used to being independent, who knew a lot about the loneliness, the fears and the heartbreaks of life. With these four years stretching between them, could they ever hope to recapture that old sense of companionship which had always been such a precious part of their married life?

And now this telegram meant that in 48 hours at the most she would know the answer to many of these questions.

SHE looked round at the house. It was polished to perfection with everything carefully put as it had been when he went away. But it couldn't be quite the same, the child's things had taken possession in many places. The cake tins were full of his favourite cakes—made with carefully-hoarded butter and sugar. There was nothing to do now but wait, and somehow those last few hours seemed worse than all the years put together. But they passed at last, and here she was at the wharf, while the great grey ship swung slowly round into position. She could see khaki-clad figures on the decks, and then she was herded into a big wharf shed with hundreds of other excited wives and parents.

"I'm going to be sensible, I'm going to be sensible," she said to herself. "I'm going to be quite calm and collected and not go weeping or shrieking or anything silly like that." And so she took

a good grip on herself. Then suddenly she saw him, bag in hand, looking quite lost and bewildered as they called out his name. With a little cry she ran towards him. All her own feelings were forgotten, he looked so miserable and uncertain, his face a little pale just as it always had been in moments of stress. He suddenly saw her from out of the sea of faces, dropped everything and grabbed her. He almost looked on the verge of tears, so she swallowed her emotion and took charge of the situation, arranging transport and so on. Then they sat in the back of the car and just looked at each other.

"He's just the same," she thought exultingly, "a little older, of course, but his voice is just the same, and his hair grows the same way, and, oh goodness, it seems the most natural thing in the world just to be sitting beside him again holding hands as if we were in our teens again."

Suddenly she remembered their daughter, who had been left with relations. "We'll go and see her now," she said, "she's all excited about her Daddy."

"Oh hell," said her husband, "I'm a bit scared of the youngster, what will she think of me?"

And indeed he was a bit scared, he didn't quite know what to say or do. With any other child he could have been completely natural, but this of his own rather overawed him. But the young lady quickly put him at his ease and was soon showing him her favourite book, though he jumped every time she said "Daddy."

AFTER much thought on the wife's part it had been arranged that the child should stay with the relations for a few days, and it proved to have been a wise provision. After all, a third party is not much use on any honeymoon, particularly a third party of three and a-half years old who demands an immense amount of attention. And the wife wanted to show her husband beyond all doubt that he still had first place in her heart, that the child had not changed her love for him, but only broadened and deepened it.

And so for a few days they lived only for each other. There was so much to talk about, so many gaps to fill in, so many experiences to exchange. They lived in a world all their own, these two, who for four years had had only memories of each other and much-censored letters to sustain them.

"Why did I worry so much beforehand?" she thought. "I should have known that it would be like this—right, and natural and good. Our marriage must have been built on the right foundations, if it survived these four years of separation. There will be difficulties and upsets and misunderstandings to face, but any marriage has to brave these storms. As long as we know that underneath them all there is a solid basis of love, and a desire for understanding, we shall be all right."

And so together they went to get their child, to begin anew the age-old hope of humanity—the building of a happy home.

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