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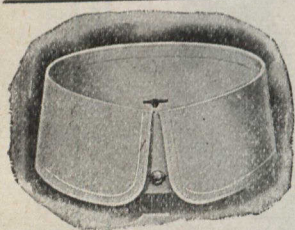
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Sweethearts and Wives

(Continued from Page 12)

Willis sighed heavily—then as he felt the convulsion which took place in his face, the shaking of the curls on his head, the cracking of the steel girder around his waist regretted his outburst, and resignedly allowed the maid who came forward with a gorgeous cloak to lay it over his shoulders. She opened the door, and Willis walking gingerly, and with extreme caution, emerged on to the landing and began to descend the stairs.

His foot touched the final step—the light from the hall suddenly flared up into his eyes, instinctively he raised his hand to shade them. When he lowered it the scene had changed again.

He was in a room furnished after a peculiar style affected in lodging houses of the genteel order—the room was small and the furniture was large. There were many chairs heavily upholstered in red and blue plush—there was an uncompromising sofa of the same order. An enormous sideboard occupied one side of the apartment, facing it in the window a very small and shaky bamboo table supported a large green pot in which grew a weary and dilapidated palm.

A clock on the mantelpiece ticked out the minutes with aggressive vigour. Willis found himself mechanically counting them. Out in the street the wind was blowing tempestuously, the rain was falling. Every time a gust of wind shook the windows or a fresh downpour of rain raced down the panes, Willis shivered.

He was filled with a gnawing, restless suspense such as he never remembered experiencing in his real life, though it seemed to be the normal condition of his new and dual existence.

Peering through the blind into the darkness as the minutes slipped past, the vague fears which tormented him began to take definite shape. Pictures formed in his mind, terrible pictures of death and disaster.

He saw a sea running high, the night was dark and black clouds swept across the inky sky. On the foam-crested waves a tiny steamer rose and fell, every moment seeming to be its last. A wave higher than the rest—the boat poised for an instant on the top of it. Then it was gone into the gulf below. Willis shivered again and agony possessed his soul.

Again he saw a lighted street, electric cars, carriages, carts and cabs in all directions. A motor swept round a corner—a crash—a cry. He saw the gathering crowd, the still figure on the pavement, the doctor bending over it!

A door slammed down below and a stick rattled into the stand. Feet, quick and vigorous came up the stairs. Pictures, newsboy, accidents, wrecks all disappeared from his mind and beatitude took their place.

The door opened to admit a young man. A very ordinary young man it seemed to Willis—quite a common place person. And yet he was conscious that he was supremely, completely and absolutely happy, that the room was no longer dingy or ugly, and that all was peace.

Ah, that was it—it must be love. That sort of love he had read about, of which he supposed Dorothy dreamed of and believed in. All the time he was cogitating thus he was nestling against the new corner, kissing the cold, brown cheek, whispering words of endearment into his ear, hardly hearing the explanations about the boat being late, the friend's motor that had never turned up after all, the thousand little things that had combined to keep the husband of three months' standing away from his anxious little wife.

It all seemed supremely foolish to Willis, and he felt annoyed with himself for being led into such a thing, yet felt, too, that it was not unpleasant. In fact, it was very pleasant indeed, even if it were silly.

He heard himself say something about dinner—about hurrying the landlady. Tearing himself reluctantly from resisting arms, he opened the door and stepped out.

Instead of arriving on a landing at the top of a flight of stairs, however, Willis found himself in a large and very untidy room. The room was shabby, the carpet worn, the furniture ribbed and scratched.

Willis himself was very tired, so tired that he could hardly stand or see—so absolutely weary in body and mind that the world seemed a matter of supreme indifference. He had never dreamed it possible that any human being could be so tired and yet remain alive.

The low chair in which he was sitting was drawn close to the fire, and on his lap lay a white bundle, which he knew to be a baby, asleep for the moment.

A sensation of the most acute despair overcame him as he held a little shirt up to the light. It was riddled with holes, patched and darned almost out of recognition, and yet it must be patched and darned again, for he knew there was no money for the purchase of a new one.

A piercing shriek from overhead brought him to his feet. Clutching the startled baby and dropping the needle and the shirt, he rushed out of the room and flew up the stairs, the baby screaming in his arms.

"Roddy—Nelly—what is the matter? Mary, Mary, where are you?" he heard himself crying as he sped along, but no one answered, and the shrieks continued unabated. Breathless he burst into the room.

Two children, a boy of five, a girl of three, were alone in the room, and the girl, whose face was streaked with dust and tears, wept lustily while her brother in the window seat played unconcernedly with his toys. There was no sign of blood, of punctured eyesight, of broken limbs as Willis had pictured to himself as he raced upstairs.

"Roddy's taken away my doll, and I want it—I want it. Boo-oo-ooooooooooooo!"

Willis sank into the nearest chair, panting for breath. Drawing the screaming child to him, he alternately soothed her, rocked the baby, and scolded the elder one.

In the midst of the din a sulky-faced girl, carrying a scuttle of coals, appeared in the doorway. Willis fell upon her wrathfully.

"Mary, how can you go away and leave the children alone like this—how often have I told you that they are not to be left?"

The girl tossed her head and set down the scuttle with a bang.

"I can't stay here for ever," she retorted pertly. "And Roddy's that naughty I can't do nothing with him." She cast a baleful glance at the non-repentant culprit in the window seat.

Willis put the baby into its cot and went drearily out of the room. The maid followed him.

"Oh, if you please," she began: "the butcher have sent to say that he won't let you have no more meat until his bill is paid, and there is no butter and no potatoes, and it's early closing, and please I can't get the kitchen stove to burn, the coal's nothing but dust, and the oven don't get hot, and I am afraid the milk's gone sour and there's none for the children's tea, and if you please we're out of jam and sugar, and what shall I get for supper?"

The catalogue of woes poured on unrestrained. Willis felt a mad desire to put his hands over his ears, to cover his eyes and blind and deafen himself to the unanswerable questions which he knew he had been endeavoring to answer unsuccessfully for interminable years.

Day in, day out, year after year, the same dreary, hopeless round, the same battle to make ends meet, the same refusal on their part to do so. The same recriminations from the same dissatisfied tradesmen, the same cheap and incompetent servants.

He heard himself returning some response to the maid, he did not know what he said, but it was sufficient to send her back to the kitchen, and her grumbling ceased. Willis went back to the sitting-room, where the pile of mending awaited him. Dropping into his chair, he drew close to the fire, giving himself up to the hopeless weariness of life and all it contained—the room grew cold and Willis began to shiver in his misery—he shivered until the chair shook under him—until the whole room seemed to shiver in sympathy.

Electric light flaring ghostly pale in the early dawn which crept through the windows, was the next thing of which he was fully conscious. He also knew that he was very cold—colder than he had ever been in his life.

Willis rose and stretched himself and yawned. The yawn and the stretch revealed to him that he was a free and unrestricted man again, the action sent the blood bounding afresh through his veins.

The ashes of last night's fire were grey and lifeless in the grate, the cigar which he had intended to smoke lay still beside his chair untouched. In the flare of the light he could see the dark patches where Dorothy's wet feet had rested the previous evening.

Dorothy! Willis paused and reflected. When he had given the matter profound thought he wrote a letter to her and then went out and posted it.