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A Mock Marriage

By M. S. England
Contd. from page 45

"It was a lie, I know, a terrible lie, but I told it for his sake. He is all I have in the world and he has suffered so much. So very much that he has told me it will be a relief to die, yet he cannot die. He has been fighting death for me. The thought of leaving me alone and unprovided for has been torture to him. He has spent all our money abroad trying to get health, and finally had to come home to die."

A sarcastic smile spread over Sir Roger's face. Was this girl such a deep schemer that she would try and have him believe that this man, her father, broken in his prime, haggard, tired and prematurely old, with the fire of life quenched through his own base living, dying other than the death his own life merited. For it was incredible she did not know, the whole country side knew what manner of man Guy Wethered had been.

"He wants to die," she continued falteringly. "He is always in pain and the worry about leaving me kept him from sleeping. So I told him you—were—going—to marry—me. I am not really sorry," she went on bravely, "for he has slept for two whole nights. I never thought you would know. It did not seem so terrible when you were not here, and how could I know you would come. You never have done before," she trailed off wearily, the tears beginning to fill her eyes.

Sir Roger, staring down at her, recognized she was very beautiful, even in her distress, and found himself wishing he had met her under different circumstances.

"Pardon me, but what do you expect me to do?" he asked. "I know I have not been here before, but when I heard your father was dying, as his nearest neighbor I could not very well keep away."

"I just want you to pretend, when you are with him, it is true," she whispered hesitatingly. "He has only a day or two at the most, and it has made him so happy."

"Very well, I'll pretend. I certainly was a bit staggered when he spoke of our engagement, but fortunately I did not deny it." Without further word he abruptly left her, and let himself out. It was only when he heard the door shut that he regretted his abruptness and stood trying to conjure an excuse to return, but none came and he had to content himself with the thought that he would call early on the morrow.

The following day he called twice, but did not again see her in spite of the fact that he loitered for some time in the vicinity of her home. Nor did Bridget tell Joy of his visits, thinking to spare her. For in spite of all her efforts she had not been able to chase away the fixed look of drawn sorrow which had pervaded her mistress' features since the interview with Sir Roger. In her faithful old heart she wondered time and again what could have been said to leave that look there. Yet in all her wondering, she would never know of the clouds that had swept over Joy's rainbow, obliterating entirely all the bright colors she had called to aid in its making. Her only rainbow now was one of hope, that she might quickly shake the dust of this place from her feet for ever, but it had no bright colors, it was dulled grey.

It was on the third day late in the afternoon that Sir Roger was summoned hastily to her side.

"Father is sinking rapidly," she said, on seeing him, "and wants to see us married before he goes."

Sir Roger was sufficiently surprised to gasp. The tired childish face, the beautiful eyes, which ought to have known happy laughter and no sorrow, peered so tragically into his own out of the gloom.

"You must arrange it," she went on hurriedly. "We can pretend. Get someone to impersonate a minister. Someone from the next village would be best. Father knows nearly everyone here. Fortunately our vicar is away. You must borrow some clothes. I have mother's wedding ring. You must go quickly, get anyone. Go and see father before you go and give your consent. It will not matter if you are too late, for he will die happy."

"Won't you sit down?" asked Joy to gain composure.

"No, I can hear all you have to say standing," he answered, carelessly.

In the dim shadow at the foot of the huge four-poster bed in the grand luxurious though neglected room, the little wedding group stood. To the man lying there, his eyes striving to pierce the dimness, came falteringly: "I, Joy, take thee, Roger Geoffrey, to be my wedded husband, etc." and he sighed contentedly, too near the valley of shadows to realize the burden of sorrow he had imposed on the shoulders of the daughter he loved so well. It was only Bridget, standing a silent witness to the mock ceremony, that in some little way understood what her young mistress was suffering, and fervently thanked God when it came to an end, when she was startled to see Sir Roger bend to kiss Joy with deep veneration, and her heart cried in pity for what a handsome pair they made.

No need now for further acting. The three who had played in the little drama silently went out of the room leaving Joy and her father alone.

"You are quite happy now, dear?" she asked tremulously, kneeling down by the bed, for her legs seemed incapable of supporting her.

"Quite, child," he answered faintly, his hand travelling over hers, seeking the ring he had placed on her mother's finger some twenty-two years earlier.

"Then you will go to sleep, dear," she added wearily, as her head dropped on the pillow beside his and she fell into a deep sleep from which Bridget awakened her some little time later.

A week had passed away, and Joy, a pathetic figure in her cheap mourning, sat at a table drawn up to the fire in the vast dim hall, staring with unseeing eyes into the flames, for she was living over again the mock ceremony, which had taken place in the room above, and felt again the kiss Sir Roger had imprinted on her brow. From that hour she had not seen or heard of him, for which she was thankful. In bitterness she had travelled far from her dream of life and love and knew that never again would see her; yet wistfully she pursued the vision of happiness which might have been.

At the sound of a voice she started to her feet and faced Sir Roger.

"You!" she cried in alarm. "You! How could you come here? To remind me? Have I not suffered enough?"

"I came to help you," he answered gently, noticing how tired and ill she looked. "I could not keep away. You will let me help you?"

"I do not need help," she faltered. "I am going away with Bridget to-morrow."

"You need not go away. You must not. I want you to stay here to accept this place as a gift from me."

"As a gift from you? What power gives you the right to give it to me?" she demanded witheringly.

"I got it from the man your father had mortgaged it to," he lied bravely, yet in part this was true, for had his father not left it to him. He could not tell her this, for Bridget had told him she knew nothing of her father's affairs and believed to the end he was one of life's greatest martyrs, and believing this, must surely hate the one in possession. "I went to London immediately I left you, so that I might procure the place and hand it back to you," he continued.

"I cannot accept it or help of any kind from you of all people. I think you might have spared me this. I have enough to bear. I am going with Bridget to her sister—till I get something to do. She says it is possible we might both get a situation together in the same house." She stopped abruptly, thinking she had said too much, and was losing dignity.

"But what if I won't allow you to take a situation?" asked Roger with a note of triumph.

"Won't allow me? What do you mean, 'Just this,'" he answered slowly. "It would be very undignified of my wife to be in service."

Joy sank back stunned. At the sight of her distress Roger's throat became uncomfortably dry.

"I suppose I deserve this," she said with tears in her eyes. "But I can bear it. He died happy, thinking I would be too. So your insults cannot hurt," she faltered, as she sank exhausted into the chair and stretching her arms over the table, lowered her head on to them and sobbed bitterly.

"Listen to me, Joy," said Roger, taking a chair and sitting at her side.

She gave a start, as her name fell from his lips for the first time.

"I want you to forgive me, dear. I must have been made. But I will give my life if need be to put you right. When I came here first, and your father spoke of our engagement, I was full of resentment and anger against you. I had never met you, I did not even know what you were like, but when I left you after our first strange interview I was deeply in love with you. I knew then that no other woman would ever hold a place in my life. I sought your presence persistently, but you persistently avoided me. Then when Bridget came for me and you told me your father's dying wish was to see us married, I felt the gods had played into my hands, and I grasped—without thinking of anything but my own great love for you—the opportunity given. It was no bogus parson or mock ceremony. It was in very truth the right thing, performed by the vicar resident here while Barnes is away."

Joy remained silent. She needed time to adjust herself to this new point of view. "I am sorry, dear," he went on. "But I wanted you more than I have ever wanted anything before. Try to forgive the mean advantage I have taken of you. I was so over anxious to possess you, dear, that perhaps I lost my head. But I will go away. You stay on here with Bridget. Try and think kindly of me," he added, rising and putting his hand gently on her bowed head.

She raised her head and opened her eyes wide, searching his face.

"Forgive me, Joy, dear," he said, looking straight down into her eyes, striving to read there some inkling of her feelings for him, but none did she give. "I am sorry you have taken it so. I was made, but I will get the marriage annulled. Good-bye, dear. Don't think too unkindly of me—remember always, I blundered because of my great love for you, and that I shall always have, for it will never die." With his head erect he left her, opened the door, and was about to pass out, when from the recess in the hall, he heard one word, "Roger!" He banged the door with his foot and went forward, caught her in his arms.

"My darling," he cried. "It isn't true you care for me a little bit?"

Bridget hearing the door bang and thinking he had gone, came carrying her mistress a cup of tea, when she caught sight of them and stepped back, a happy smile lighting up her faithful old face. "I knew something would come of it," she ejaculated under her breath, "when I saw him kiss her so nicely after that play wedding."

Riddles

Why did the salt-shaker? Because he saw the spoon-holder.

What is the difference between a lover and his rival? One kisses the miss; the other misses the kiss.

What was Joan of Arc made of? She was Maid of Orleans.

When is a man thinner than a lath? When he's a-shaving.

When is a sheep like ink? When you take it up into the pen.

What is the most difficult to conquer? Hardship.

What tree is of the greatest importance in history? The date.

What is that which occurs twice in a moment, and not once in a thousand years? The letter m.

Why is a watch-dog larger by night than by day? Because he is let out at night, and by day he is taken in.

Born presumably before the world, destined to live almost as long as the world, and yet never five weeks old. The moon.

Taking the Joy Out of Life

Fond Mother—"Don't forget to put your tooth brush in your suit-case, Bobby." Bobby (going to the country for a week). "Oh, I thought this was going to be a pleasure trip!"

Small Coin

"I don't see why that tune haunts me constantly," complained a dull man who was always humming.

"Because you are forever murdering it!" came the quick reply from Foote

Foolish Question

"Pa," said little Frank, as he turned the pages of his history, "how did the cliff dwellers keep warm in winter time?"

"Why, I guess they used the mountain ranges. Now, don't ask me any more foolish questions."