

A Mock Marriage

Written for the Western Home Monthly by Marcus S. England

JOY WETHERED stood gazing thoughtfully out of the window, far away through the trees to where stood a tall colossal mass, the closed mansion of her nearest neighbor. Consciously she saw nothing. Her thoughts racing pell-mell through her tired mind directly and indirectly were with the man lying on the bed in the shadow behind her.

For days she had been racking her brain for something she might say to ease his mind and make his few remaining days happy. She knew well, that if he knew she would be comparatively easy and a relief.

It was a cold evening towards the end of October. The sun, a crimson ball, had glided down to the West, leaving a leaden greyneess. With a shiver and her mind fully made up, Joy turned to the bed and bent over the suffering man.

"Won't you try and sleep, Daddy?" she asked tenderly. "It would make me so happy if you would."

"How can I sleep, child, when in a few days at most I must leave you alone and penniless?"

"Is that all that's troubling you, dear?" asked Joy, with a forced lightness. "I shall be all right, ever so all right. I am going to marry—Roger Fairfax. We—"

"Marry Sir Roger!" demanded her father, incredulously, trying in his excitement to raise himself. "My dear child, but you have never spoken of this!"

Impelled to lie for his sake, Joy meant to carry it through to the bitter end. It was characteristic of her to do things well, and this she meant to be her best. She had needed time to determine the lie and to furnish and make it vivid for presentation. Moreover she felt how urgent it was that Bridget, her old faithful servant, should have rest, and this state of things had been going on so long, and gradually getting worse as the end drew nearer. This lie would serve them well; already she saw its good effect.

"It was before he went away he asked me to marry him, Daddy," she faltered, "but we arranged not to speak of it till his return. So you see, dear, I shall be ever so rich and happy, and can keep Bridget with me always. Now, you'll go to sleep, won't you?" she asked, forcing a brightness she was far from feeling as she arranged his pillow and smoothed the bed-clothes.

A dozen questions trembled on her father's lips, but the reaction was too great for his weary mind and he fell back on his pillow regarding her with wonder. One thought obliterated all others, that this child he had wilfully neglected and ruined was to marry the man who held the mortgage of every stick and stone they possessed.

Of all things he could have wished for, no greater privilege could have been accorded him than to leave her in possession of the grand old home he had squandered and scattered to the winds.

Bending over him, Joy saw the tired dim eyes close, and waited till she heard the regular breathing which denotes sleep. Then, and only then, did she leave him.

"And you mean to say you told him that?" asked Bridget, aghast.

"Yes, Bridget, I told him that, and could you have seen the look of pleasure on his poor tired face, you, like me, would have felt well compensated," answered Joy wearily. "I have tried so long to find something to ease his mind, so that he might die happy; and that seemed just the right thing for he is sleeping now as peacefully as a child."

"Well, well, dearie, all I can say is, if his mind is at rest at last the saints be praised. After all, who is to know anything about it. Sir Roger abroad, master's dying, and wild horses wouldn't make me say anything. But whatever made you think of it?"

"Now, come, dearie," begged Bridget, without waiting for an answer, as she noticed Joy covered her face with her hands, and knew she was overwrought. "Have this hot soup and get to bed while you have the chance."

Joy needed no second bidding, and after a strenuous effort to comply with the request of faithful old Bridget, in spite of the obstruction in her throat which seemed ready to choke her, she murmured a good-night, and sought her own room.

"Poor tired lamb," muttered Bridget, as she watched the slim girlish figure out of sight, "it's a cruel life for a sweet young thing like her."

The moon had passed out of sight behind the tall trees, but the sky was alight with stars, which gave all the light Joy needed as she prepared for rest. With a stab of realization she went over the events of the last few hours.

"Whatever made you think of that?" Bridget had asked, and her face crimsoned at the thought. How could she confess to Bridget or even to herself that Sir Roger was her dream hero and had been ever since the first time she had seen him riding through the village. True, it was he had never noticed her, but then she would have been surprised had he, for she was always so poor looking and shabby.

"What if ever he found out the lie she had told?" she reflected, with a start. But how could he, she asked herself abruptly, and strove to dismiss the whole thing from her mind, but persistently it would return, till worn out she fell asleep and dreamed of a life in which Sir Roger was her constant companion and love reigned over all.

A few days later, returning from a walk, she lingered in the later afternoon sunshine and regarded the stately old home she was so soon to leave.

Wistfully she took in its neglected grandeur, pursuing the vision of happiness which might have been if her father's health had not required that he should spend their all in trying to get strong.

This weed-covered and unkempt lawn was her first instinctive recollection, and she was startled to know how very much it meant to her. "But, after all," she sighed, "daddy is happy," and made her way through the weeds to where she beheld Bridget coming towards her in a state of great agitation.

"Lord a mercy, Miss, who could have guessed this would happen?" cried Bridget. "It's not daddy?" asked Joy, in alarm. "No, it's not master, he's about the same. It's Sir Roger, he returned from India a day or two ago, and hearing master was ill, came over to see him."

In the pause that ensued, Bridget, regarding her mistress, saw she was trembling and white to the lips.

"What shall I do, Bridget?" she asked, when she was able to speak. "What shall I do?"

"You can't do anything, dearie. To keep out of his way would be best. It's made master happy and he has only a day or two to live and then we'll be away from the place for ever."

"But, Bridget, I cannot let the man scorn us. Father is sure to speak of it, it is the only thing he talks of. I must explain. Surely he will understand," she cried, wringing her hands in distress.

"Very well, miss, just what do you think best," said Bridget, turning and entering the house.

"I must tell him, Bridget, I will." Some little time later seated by the meagre fire in the dim old hall, Joy heard steps descending the stairs and went to their direction.

"Gad," reflected Sir Roger furiously, "the old scoundrel not satisfied with ruining his own life, but must plot on his death bed to ruin mine by forcing me into marrying a woman I have never set eyes on." As if out of his thought he heard a voice and a slim girlish figure stood before him. "So this is the daughter," he reflected.

"May I speak to you?" she asked, in a sweet low voice.

"Oh, yes, of course, we are engaged to be married, aren't we?" he answered sarcastically.

Silently Joy stood regarding him interrogatively and shrank back white to the lips as she saw his scornful look; she knew her father had spoken and she was afraid.

"Oh, please," she gasped, incoherently, "let me explain."

"But your father has explained," he replied coldly, without any signs of helping her. Joy trembled, but set herself to counterfeit an air of calm.

"But let me tell you," she breathed. "You will understand better then. I know you will you must."

"Go ahead then," he said abruptly.

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