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IN THE DARKEST HOUR.

COMPLETE STORY.

By the Author of "IN THE SHADOW OF MILL-DALE," &c.

The evening is closing in; the clock in the barrack square has struck six some time past. The mists are rising across the fields by the river, and the last rays of a crimson sun glance through the staircase window straight into my eyes as I, Isabel Eyreton, with slow footsteps descend the uncarpeted flight. My boy has had his romp and said his baby prayers; he is asleep at last, and I am free to re-join my husband. I almost grudge the time my child has detained me in the room above; my heart is heavy, and my voice fails for tears, Frank and I have been married nearly four years, and to-morrow will see our first separation.

With a wretched attempt at cheerfulness I enter our sitting-room where my husband is busy packing away the books and small ornaments that have given a home-like air to our barrack-rooms. His coat is off, and he looks what he is, a tall, strong, well-made fellow, and to me the handsomest man in the world. He hears me come in and turns.

"Well, Isa, it is nearly finished. Does not the place look bare and ugly?"

It does indeed. We have put off dismantling our little room till the last possible moment; but it is done at length, and the place we have made our happy home these eight months past has resumed the bare, blank, furnished-by-contract look of "officers' quarters." I sit down carefully in a skeleton-arm-chair—one of those pieces of furniture which have a trick of folding up spontaneously—and survey the result of my husband's toil. He puts the lid on the packing case and begins hammering; I lean back glad of the noise. I want to talk but cannot speak without crying. In these few moments I may recover myself; for talk to Frank I must. Is not this the last evening we shall be together?

Oh, terrible to-morrow! We part for the first time in our wedded life—and when to meet again? No, no! Away haunting boding thoughts! I know my husband will meet danger in that far-off African land; but he is all I have in the world, he and my baby—just my two Franks. Surely Heaven is merciful!

It is my first trial. For nearly four years we have lived the rough moving soldier's life—now in pleasant quarters, now in some dull country town. Our surroundings were of little moment while we had each other and our child. We were almost equally alone in the world. I had never known mother or father, and the old aunt who had brought me up died soon after my marriage. Frank's people had cast him off on my account. They were proud, and, younger son, though he was, could not forgive his bride's having neither purse nor pedigree. Indeed some mystery had hung over my parents, into which I had never cared to inquire; but my aunt's silence and reserve on the point had been highly unsatisfactory to my new relatives. They were not rich themselves; but there was an old uncle whose wealth and estate were the heritage of Frank's elder brother. Two years after our marriage that elder brother died, and Frank became the heir. It made no difference to us at the time. Mrs. Eyreton was so stricken by the death of her favorite son that they took her abroad; and there she and her daughters are now, travelling about, seeking for her the health that will not come. Of course Frank was forgiven after a fashion; but no word of kindness was sent to me or the child, and our quiet life flowed on as usual till, just one fortnight ago, the news came that the regiment was ordered at once to the Cape.

My husband was a man and a soldier. Without any special desire to butcher his fellow-creatures, he loved his profession, and gladly welcomed the chance of seeing active service; but that which weighed on his mind and made the summons unpleasant was the perplexing question how to dispose of his wife and child during an uncertain period of absence. We had talked it over together; we had turned it over in our brains separately. It had been more heavily on Frank's mind than mine; for to me all considerations of personal welfare were swallowed up in the black, terrible prospect of parting. I had tried not to wor-

ry him with fruitless tears and lamentations; but night and day I had been haunted by the presentiment that when he had left me I should see his face no more. It was but folly, the fancy of any young wife at such a time; but it pressed sorely on my heart, and made me jealous of Frank's every look and word through those swift-flying days.

The feeling might have been lessened had there been a home to which I might have returned for the time of Frank's absence—an old life to take up, with the prospect, having left it to join him once, of the possibility of doing so again; but I was homeless. Our parting would send me adrift upon that sea of loneliness from which his love was my ark of refuge four years ago; and, if I had none to whom I could go, Frank had none to whom he could send me.

To join the Red Cross nurses—bringing the baby, of course—was my first wild scheme. Frank shook his head over that, and also negatived my next.

"A small cottage in the country. Baby and I could manage."

"Scarcely upon our income," said my husband—"not as I could bear the thought of your living; and, besides, my darling, you are too young and pretty to be alone."

Putting aside the last as unworthy of my dignity as a matron of over twenty years of age, I was obliged to acknowledge the force of the first objection. Frank's heirship did him no good now, and, though his mother—his only surviving parent, on whom he was quite dependent—had not carried out her first angry threat of depriving him of his allowance, that allowance had been barely sufficient to eke out his pay and keep us in necessities while we lived in barracks. Lodgings were beyond our means.

"I tell you what!" cried my husband suddenly. "There's my uncle! We never thought of him. Why, of course, it is the right thing! Eyreton Court will be mine one day; I am the old fellow's heir; and, though he has taken no notice of us, he hasn't abused us like the rest of the family. I'll write at once, and propose your paying him a visit while I am away."

"But he is a little mad, isn't he?" I murmured doubtfully. "At least you used to say so."

"A little eccentric," said Frank—"that's all. He doesn't take kindly to his fellow-man, but his fellow-woman ought to be a different being. There was some dreadful unhappiness about his son's death, and he shut himself up, and took to hating everybody; but he ought to have got over that now. It is ages since it all happened."

Not altogether reassured, I begged my husband to consider his uncle's feelings on being unexpectedly called upon to shelter, not only a strange young woman, but a small boy and his nurse into the bargain.

"Oh, he'll get used to it!" cried Frank, to whom his own bright idea appeared the one thing feasible. "It will be a great charity if you rouse him up and induce him to take an interest in things. There, Isa—you can't go out with the Red Cross, my poor child, but there's a mission for you. I am sure he only wants rousing; and he is certain to take to you. I shall expect to see him quit: an agreeable member of society when I return. You and he will be giving parties and entertaining the neighbourhood."

I tried to laugh, but did not succeed. However, Frank was prompt; he wrote the letter and posted it forthwith. By the end of the week an answer arrived. It was short enough—one line written lengthwise across the paper in a cramped, crabbed hand—

"If they must come, let them come. FRANCIS EYRETON."

"Laconic," said Frank, "and not too encouraging; but there is no help for it, Isa—no help;" and I saw that.

So this last evening comes. Frank rises from his completed labour and stretches his weary arms.

"Our last evening, Isa!" he says sadly, as he comes over to me and puts his arms round me, looking fixedly into my face, as though to impress it more deeply on his memory.

"Couldn't we wait one day more," I suggest coaxingly—"just one, to see you off?"

"No," says Frank decidedly, turning his eyes from my piteous gaze. "I have written to say that you will arrive to-morrow night; and then, if you write at once, I shall hear from you before we sail. I couldn't leave England without knowing that you were safely settled."

So I submit to what may be my husband's last command, and the morrow sees our parting.