

CONTRACT WIFE

CHAPTER IX

They loved and the world was lost in unthinking rapture.

"You look so sweet," he said huskily. "I think of you every minute of the day and you fill my dreams at night, but when I see you I realize all over again how lovely you are."

"Don't!" The name slipped out and his hand covered hers for a moment. "You can't mean that. Why—I might be anybody."

"You are my whole life now. It doesn't matter who you used to be. You see," he went on gently, "I have never been in love before and I'm taking it rather hard."

"It can't be love."

"It is love and I'm this much in earnest. Tomorrow I shall tell Patricia, and very soon, in a few days, I think, I shall be free again."

"But why should you think I want you to be free?"

"I only know that I must be free. I want the right to make you love me, to protect you." Every fibre in Pat's being yearned toward him. Don thought she needed protection. Even with her identity shrouded in mystery he wanted her for his wife. It had all been simpler than her maddest hopes. Half inclined to tell him the truth, she hesitated.

It seemed so flat, so ridiculous to say, "I am your wife, Don." Such an anticlimax, no demanding of a thousand explanations. A little nagging fear warned her that the perfection of the moment might be shattered by such a revelation. So she drifted on the blissful tide.

They had tea before a blazing fire in a small white cottage. Sitting side by side on an old Duncan Fife sofa they drank tea from exquisite Spode cups. A withered, soft-spoken gentleman served them. Twilight fell and still they lingered, caught in the mystery and magic of newly awakened love. Alone in the charming room, Don took Pat in his arms.

"Darling," he breathed, "I love you." And blindly she raised her lips, fiercely she clung to him while the crimson world rocked and spun.

"I've kissed so many women," he said, half laughing, his hand lean cheek pressed close to hers. "And I've really never kissed anyone before."

"Dearest," Pat's whispered.

Later, driving slowly homeward, Don said, "I promised not to ask questions, but—won't you trust me, sweetheart?"

Pats nodded dreamily. "With my life. Tomorrow—at the coronet." Vaguely she wanted time in which to choose the words of her confession. Suppose his love turned to mere regard for his wife, Patricia, when he learned that he had been the victim of a bold feminine trick.

At Pat's request Don left her at the imposing entrance of the Goddard Hotel. He was to see Atherton, his lawyer, before going home. He, too, might have news on the morrow.

In parting he whispered, "I love you, dear—tomorrow."

Pats quickly crossed the crowded lobby. She saw a man near the desk stare at her and knew he followed as she left by a side entrance. She was even half sure that his taxi followed hers as she drove out Fifth avenue. But riotous thoughts claimed her and she forgot the incident.

After breakfast the next morning Don broached the subject of their marriage contract. He told Pat that he loved someone very dearly, that she was in trouble and that he must be free to protect her with his name. Pats calmly accepted the announcement, acknowledged his sincere thanks for her many kindnesses and the convenient marriage of Don Monterey and his unattractive secretary was, within a few hours, to be ended.

Pats took a walk in the park to think things over. She walked slowly, trying to outline the story she must tell Don. As proof of her astounding news she would produce the wig and glasses. Step by step she rehearsed her lines. All the time a little dread tugged in the back of her mind. Could she convince Don of her love? And might not his love turn to weary indifference with the realization that he had been duped? In a state of conflicting emotions she went back to the hotel. In the lobby, the manager asked if he might not see her privately for a few moments.

His grievance was Rosie. He apologetically explained that her account was getting out of hand. He had spoken to her repeatedly and she had definitely given him the impression that she was Mr. Monterey's guest. Quite obviously the manager believed that Rosie had been "putting something over" on Don Monterey's wife, and that he felt certain of getting the bill paid by appealing to Mrs. Monterey. Naturally she would allow no breath of scandal to touch her famous husband.

Pats explained that Mr. Monterey was in no way responsible for Miss Akers' account, but signified her willingness to settle the account providing Rosie spent not another night in the hotel. The manager agreed and Pats opened her check book. The amount was rather staggering but she wrote the check. To be rid of Rosie was cheap at any price.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention," she said. "Men in Mr. Monterey's position are—what shall I say—victimized?"

Going up to the suite, Pats learned from Sims that Don was lunching with his lawyer and that he might not return for dinner. She dismissed the secretary for the day and warned Sims that no one was to be admitted. If she knew Rosie, the far would soon be flying and it should not be flung at Don's head or hers. On the morrow they would face Rosie together.

(To Be Continued)

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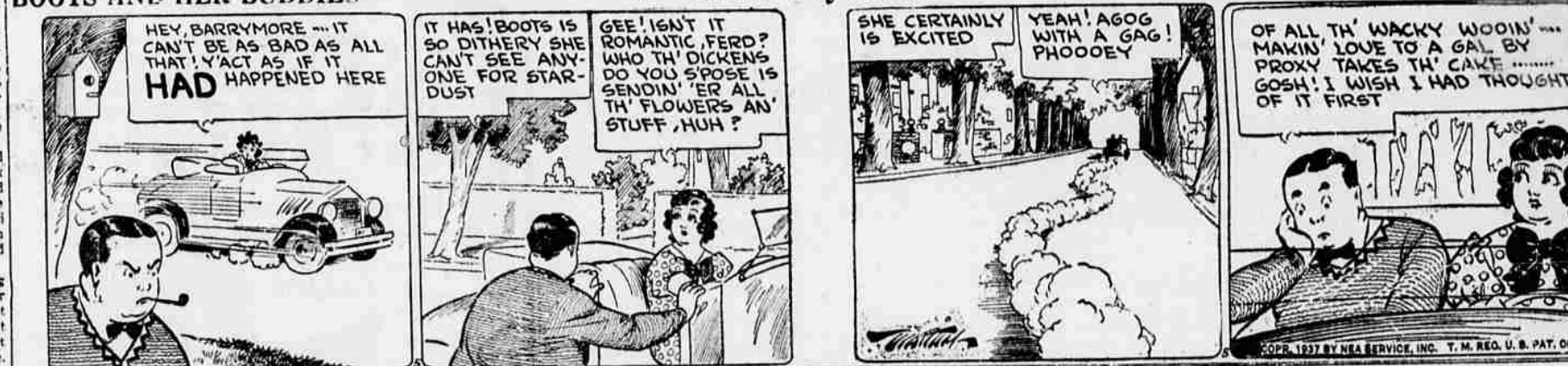
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