

IRONY OF FATE

By R. H. WILKINSON
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BEGINNING with the day Sheila Flake commenced her duties at the Bellevue hospital, she promised herself that, under no conditions, would she fall in love with Dr. Julian Oakes.

The resolution was made entirely because of hearsay.

Until the moment she stepped into Doctor Oakes' office, garbed in her immaculate, starched uniform, she had not set eyes on the unsuspecting object of her self-denial.

And for this reason, Sheila can be forgiven for so hasty a decision.

For as Sheila stood there just inside the office door and looked across the room at the tall, spare man who, at the moment, was stooped over a filing cabinet, understanding came.

In one breath-taking moment she knew why it was that all the other nurses (with no exceptions) so frankly admitted their affection for this noble-featured surgeon.

He looked up at her and smiled. Sheila saw the marks of strain and worry that lined his face.

She saw eyes that were filled with kindness and gentleness; eyes that were at once alive and interesting, yet thoughtful and appraising.

He came across the room and spoke to her, introduced himself, offered a chair.

And for some unaccountable reason her heart began to pound, a pounding she could not still.

There was something about him; his voice, his manner of walking, the gentle appeal of his personality, that sent the warm blood coursing through her veins.

And from that day forward Sheila was miserable.

She loved him.

She admitted it frankly, but only to herself.

And this reluctance to release the last fragment of her crumpled resolution only served to make the misery in her heart more poignant.

Those others—her fellow-nurses—who so openly discussed their regard for "handsome Doctor Oakes" found relief for their feelings in those little intimate tete-a-tetes that are forever in progress in one room or another during the course of a day or night; a relief that Sheila would not permit her tortured soul.

Never, she told herself, would she admit or even hint at the depth of this strange emotion that stirred her at sound of Doctor Oakes' familiar steps in the corridor, at sight of his tall form bent over an operating table.

There was consolation in the knowledge that Doctor Oakes' attitude toward the obvious flirtatiousness of the other nurses was quite phlegmatic.

Though by the same token Sheila knew that should she betray her own feelings, her humiliation would be 10 times greater; her hurt unbearable.

For even as Sheila was certain of her love for the man, she was even more certain that that love was a thousand times deeper and more lasting than that of all her companions combined.

Sheila knew it couldn't last.

Sooner or later he would have to know.

Either that or she'd have to go away. And of the two courses that were open to her she wondered on more than one occasion if she had the courage to choose the latter.

For the present it was bearable; though with each passing day the torture increased.

Her work brought her in close contact with him.

Irony of fate it was.

For of all those to choose from, old and new, Doctor Oakes had selected her to aid him in the majority of his operations.

Little did he know that the act was adding fuel to the fires of conflict and suppressed emotion that raged within the girl's soul.

If, at first, Sheila had dimly hoped his discrimination for her attendance upon him was prompted by personal interest, she hoped in vain.

Not by the merest broadening of a smile did the man indicate his concern was other than professional.

During business hours he looked upon her with the same expression as he bestowed upon an unusual streptococcal infection.

And when, during off hours, they chanced to meet in one of the many corridors, his greeting was nothing more than the bright nod which he reserved for all nurses alike.

The climax came six months after the first day that Sheila had stepped into Doctor Oakes' office.

The conflict in her soul had not raged without leaving physical traces of its existence.

The color had left her cheeks. There were rings under her eyes. Her nerves were jumpy.

And when at last she was forced to admit to herself that the end had come, that she must get away, she was thankful.

She thanked God for the courage that would enable her to depart from the hospital without betraying her secret.

It was mid-afternoon when Sheila descended to the floor where the superintendent's office was located.

The corridor was empty, the hospital unusually quiet.

But as Sheila hurried past one door after another, the quietude was abruptly interrupted.

A door was flung open, and a doctor emerged.

He stared wildly about him for an instant, and his eyes fell on Sheila.

He gasped excitedly.

"Quick! It's Doctor Oakes! We must operate at once! He's collapsed as a result of overwork and strain!"

Sheila's heart stood still.

For just a moment she hesitated. The doctor had gone.

The corridor was empty again. Beyond lay the superintendent's office.

Could she go through with it? On top of everything else, this!

Would her nerves stand the strain? Other nurses were available.

There was one in the corridor now.

She shuddered at the thought.

Another in attendance while an operation was being performed on this man who had stirred the very depths of her soul! Unbearable!

Sheila steeled herself to the task.

It was the smile with which he had looked upon her before going under the ether that steeled her; that bore her up during that delicate performance of the surgeons.

And now it was over.

Things swayed crazily.

Sheila leaned against the wall for support.

She felt herself sinking; knew that she had found a chair.

She tried bravely to rally.

How humiliating for them to find her like this.

And her last operation, too.

But no one was looking, no one paying any attention.

Doctor Oakes was coming out of the ether.

She heard him moan.

She stood up, tried to reach the door, failed.

She must go, must get away from him.

He was safe now.

It would be better that she didn't wait until he'd regained consciousness, better that she didn't look into his eyes again.

She clutched at the door jamb. . . . The unconscious man was talking, mumbling incoherently.

Sheila tried not to listen, tried not to hear his voice. . . . And then her grip on the door jamb tightened. Her heart stood utterly still. . . . A strange nausea swept over her. But through the thickness of it she heard Doctor Oakes' voice. Clearer now, more distinct, unmistakable.

"Sheila! Darling, come to me. Oh, it's been torture not telling you, trying not to let you know I loved you. . . . Silly I was to even think there was a chance, that you could care. . . . Why, I'm so much older. . . . Of course you couldn't care. . . . No fault of yours. . . . I don't want for even thinking. . . . But it's got the best of me. . . . I must get away. . . . Some place where I can forget. . . . Darling, I love you. . . ."

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