

WEDLOCK

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Wedlock by John Strange Winter

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BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER

Author of "Bootle's Baby," "Grip," "Into an Unknown World,"
"The Truth Tellers," Etc., Etc.



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CHAPTER I

THE DINNER OF HERBS

“I HAVE great news for you, Mary; Captain Conway has been here.”

“Captain Conway—yes! And what did he want, mother? What news did he bring?”

Mary Hamilton took off her black straw hat as she spoke and pushed the hair away from her forehead with a weary gesture. Mrs. Hamilton busied herself with the simple tea-table, assiduously arranging plates, setting the teaspoons straight in the saucers, laying the butter-knife at an exact angle, and smoothing away an infinitesimal crease in the white cloth.

“He—he—he made a suggestion to me, Mary,” she began, nervously.

“A suggestion!” Mary Hamilton sat down and eyed her mother expectantly. “You don’t mean that he proposed to you, mother,” she exclaimed.

“Something very like it,” replied Mrs. Hamilton, still keeping herself very busy with the table.

For a moment there was silence between them; Mary Hamilton sat looking with astonishment at her mother and at last she spoke.

“I suppose it wouldn’t be a bad thing in the mere way of money, mother,” she said, slowly. “But—but—oh, mother dear, you could never bring yourself to do it.”

For the first time Mrs. Hamilton turned and looked straight at her daughter. “My dear child,” she exclaimed—“you don’t understand.

There is no question of *my* marrying Captain Conway—it is—at least he never—besides my devotion to your poor father's memory should have kept you from jumping to any such conclusion. Captain Conway is a good man, and any woman might be honored in marrying him, but my heart is in the grave and—and besides, he did not propose, he does not propose that *I* should consider the question of becoming his wife.”

Mary Hamilton stared open-eyed at her mother. “Dear mother,” she said, gently—“I am tired to-night—the children were very troublesome to-day and the rooms seemed more stuffy than usual. I feel confused. Do tell me just what Captain Conway did suggest to you.”

Mrs. Hamilton began to pour out the tea with a vehemence which showed how perturbed in mind she was. “Your poor father

always said that I was injudicious in telling news," she cried, in honest self-abasement. "I ought to have seen that you were tired. Here is your tea, darling. Drink it at once and have another cup to go on with. The truth is, Mary, that Captain Conway has flurried me till I hardly know whether I am standing on my head or my heels and—and I never gave a thought to your being tired out with that hateful school,—oh, to think that *my* daughter should ever have been a board-school mistress, not one remove from a National school, and your poor father a clergyman in Holy Orders."

"My dear mother, do explain yourself," said Mary, a fearful sense of coming evil gradually overspreading her.

"Oh, my darling," cried the older woman, "it's all over now—all the drudgery, all the pinching and the nipping. I've said little or nothing because you were slaving your youth