

"Will you please let me look at it?" she asked, slowly turning towards him.

"Lissa!" I said again.

The man was under the spell of her will, certainly. His hand came down slowly with the paper: it almost fell into her hands. I heard Snelling, another opponent, whisper—

"Barnes! Barnes! that is all the copy you have."

"Husband," said Lissa, turning to me gally, "is this document true, or false?"

"False, Lissa, utterly false, from beginning to end; the product of the brains of a half madman, half knave, and written fifteen years ago."

"Then I will not read it: I believe my husband before all in the world," she said, with simple majesty, towering before them. With one look at me, swift as the light she darted towards the fire. The treacherous paper curled black before their eyes; but, though every man started forward, she was too quick for them.

I wish I could give you a picture of the grandeur of her expression; for though reason might have lain dormant just then, love made her royal.

"Lissa!" I said as soon as I could speak: perhaps she thought I reproved her, for she answered, simply and calmly—

"I have done it!"

Like wolves disappointed of their prey, Barnes and his party gnashed their teeth.

"By Jove!" whispered my friend, "you've got a wife in ten thousand."

"No," said Lissa quietly: "any good wife would do it."

Barnes turned upon her, his coarse face glowing with purple wrath.

"Let me tell you, madam, you are no lady."

Another moment, and he would have been in the fire; but happily I was pulled back, and the perhaps murderous blow fell on empty air. But my teeth were locked so that for a minute I could not unclinch them; when I did, I pointed to the door.

"Go," I said, "and carry with you my resignation of the honour my friends have done me by nominating me for Congress. The happiness of my wife is worth more to me than any office of trust or profit; and while politics are what they are, and a man must run the muck of personal abuse, I am candidate for no position whatever. Had you succeeded in preserving that vile document, I would have fought you to the last, despite odds; you should have taken back every lie, every foul word, fabricated among your set. But now I am a free man; my home is my castle, and holds none but my friends. Go!"

They skulked out, one by one, like the cowards they were, my friend volunteering to lead them from the house.

Then, then! Oh the rapture of that precious moment! the ecstasy when my true, beautiful wife sprang to my arms, and I lavished kisses upon her cheeks, her lips, her hair, while she sobbed upon my breast, utterly unnerved, now that the conflict was past.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"And how came it all about, my glorious little wife?" I asked as I released her, holding her at arm's length, feasting my eyes upon her. "Laces, diamonds, silks, tears! You dazzle me. Tell me, how came you to think of such a role?"

"I cannot tell," was the reply: "only something kept saying to me that I ought to be with you, that I could perhaps keep you from harm. Besides, you remember you told me I might be at the supper, the little feast. So I went up stairs, and in honour of that I dressed me for an opera, in all my best. I had not thought of such a thing a moment before."

"After that I was restless. I kept hoping they would be done their conference, till I heard loud voices and some terrible sounds. That brought me down into the front parlour, where I stood trembling and frightened, till suddenly something inspired me; and after that came all that you saw. 'I think I could have died for you as I felt then.'"

"Well, after this bit of high tragedy," said my friend, coming into the room, "what next?"

"The feast!" cried Lissa joyfully. "We can afford to be happy now; no more politics, no more scandal, no more trouble."

"As to the trouble, God only knows," I answered; "but as to the politics, never as long as Heaven helps me!"

The winter that ensued was one of the pleasantest of my life. Lissa provided many merry little surprises, and a few that were not so merry.

For instance, she went out one day on a benevolent enterprise, and found herself trapped in a nest of ship-fever. Another time, going out of town to visit one of her proteges, she entered the wrong car on returning, and was carried twenty miles from home. Much to my terror, night and storm came on, but no wife.

What a tempest that was! How the smitten trees groaned, and the fierce winds twisted them! What voices howled and shrieked! Nine, ten, eleven! I was going frantically from one depot to the other, and

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