

and nothing imperative called me to the office. I was curious to see how my present would fit, and accordingly took advantage of the opportunity. I tried my best to get into the first one; I did get into it after some little difficulty, but that was all. Something held my arms out at right angles. I think it must have been the armholes, for they caught my shoulders like a vice, and kept them stationary. In vain I tried to clutch at the collar, wriggled this way and that, panted, perspired. Oh that they would fit me, for Lissa's sake! I tried on the next. The shoulders were loose enough, but the bosom would not meet within an inch from top to bottom; there was clearly no help for that defect. The third one choked me so that I should have been black in the face in five minutes. The fourth was a combination of all the defects of the three preceding, and gave me the look of a chicken just bursting out of its shell. The other two were duplicates of the first and second.

The beautiful shirts! Lissa's gift. I laid them all aside with a gesture of despair. I was utterly disappointed and miserable, for there was no remedy; and how could I tell that poor, exultant little soul that every shirt was a misfit? Some men might have done it. I called to mind a fact in which the husband, not meaning to be unkind, remarked, when a similar gift was made with equal love and labour—

"They are very nice, but you ought to see the shirts my mother makes!"

I thought rapidly under the spur of my love for Lissa. What should I do? To wear them was out of the question; to have them altered, equally impracticable. I took the precious bundle finally, after I had decided what should be their destination, and hid it away in a box up stairs, almost as guilty as if I were burying something human. Lissa rarely went among the old things up stairs, so I was safe. Then I hurried down to a certain store where my shirts were usually made, and left my order for a set of shirts to be sewed by hand in the best style of needlework, to be finished by a certain time, and left at my office. Finally I intended to smuggle them home in a way that should not attract Lissa's notice.

I took good care to avoid a *tete-a-tete* with Lissa until after tea.

"Well," she said, with a beaming face, as I sheltered myself behind the evening paper, "and how did the shirts fit?"

"You ought to have seen them," I exclaimed, with an eloquent countenance.

"I knew they would please you."

"Please me! I am enchanted."

"I was a little afraid, you know, because Jo said they ought to be shrunked."

I looked at her helplessly.

"Shrunked in the cloth—you know what I mean, washed or wet before made. I forgot that."

"Ah!" said I, thoughtlessly; "that lets the secret out;" and then I bit my lip. I could have bitten it through.

"What secret—lets what secret out?" she asked rapidly.

"Why, that they felt so dry and—and stiff, you know—in fact, just as new shirts always feel."

"But they did fit well?" she queried anxiously.

"They fit like—*everything*!" I said with unwonted enthusiasm. "Do you know," I added glibly, "I thought so much of those shirts, that I laid them away as if they had been the greatest treasures in life, for fear I should put one of them on."

"For fear?" she ejaculated with a puzzled look.

"For this reason," I went on as hastily as possible. "Those are uncommonly beautiful shirts; they ought to be; they were made by an uncommonly beautiful woman. Now, those shirts are only fit to be donned on festivals—great occasions, you know; and not one of them is to be worn before the 28th of September, which, you will please bear in mind, is my birthday. What do you think of that, little woman?"

I should like at least to see one of them on. There might be something to be done."

"Not a thing can be done—not a thing to improve them;" and I covered a convulsive laugh with an outrageous fit of impromptu coughing, which almost strangled me, and for which I left the room to find a remedy. But, once alone by myself, I laughed till I cried, as I thought of my image in the looking-glass, and the rueful figure I cut in the beautiful new shirts.

CHAPTER XXJ

The ruse succeeded to perfection. The new shirts were models of fineness and beauty. Lissa was radiant.

"It is the first I ever did!" she repeated again and again, and called all the household to look at them. Of course I alone was in the secret; and a secret it should be, I had determined, to the end of my life. At first my conscience was as easy as the fit of the shirts. Lissa came up to me, then went back, then came up again.

"Well, dear, what is it?" I asked, not without some misgivings.

"I was thinking. Did I make *two* rows of stitching round the collar? I must have, to be sure; but still, did I? I don't remember."

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