

Barnes is a man who will stop at nothing."

"I would not have it published for the world; I will withdraw first," I said. "It would kill my wife."

"Perhaps it can be settled," was the response. "I'll try to get Barnes and two or three of the chief conspirators to come over to your house, if you will appoint some evening. It may be we can appeal to their honour, if they have any."

CHAPTER XXIII.

I consented, though reluctantly, to this arrangement; Lissa was informed that I expected some of my gentlemen friends on a certain evening, that we wanted the back parlour to ourselves—with sundry other little items.

"Then we are not to come down at all, Jo and I?" she said anxiously.

"No, my dear; we are to be a gander party, *pur et simple*," I made reply.

"And shall I get you a supper?"

I had not thought of that.

"Tiddy can wait upon you, you know," she said, a regret in her voice.

"Perhaps by that time I shall want you," I responded.

Her face grew charming.

"I hope so; and I hope this election will soon be past. You are so anxious and so changed, that sometimes I am afraid!"

"Well, of what? Don't hesitate," said I.

"Why—of so many things! Did you know that Mrs. Ellery is electioneering for you? She was here to-day."

"Mrs. Ellery!" I thundered. "I shall have to choke Mrs. Ellery."

"She says you have many enemies; and she asked me so many questions, even about the poor little dead baby; and, O Charlie! is it true that they write you down in the papers? is it true so many people dislike you?—you who have always made friends wherever you were, you who are so good?"

"Yes; but, my dear, political enemies may yet be friends, if you can understand that."

"I cannot; I think political enemies make many a wife sad," she said.

"And break many a wife's heart," I might have added.

"Then I will have a little feast for you—some oysters, and some cake and coffee?"

"Just what you please," I said.

The fire blazed cheerily that evening; a grand anthracite, red to the core, sending out into the room a part of the sunshine that once it sucked into its veins when the coal was a singing tree of the forest; a sunshine darkened perhaps by the imprison-

ment of ages, but a right royal crimson after all.

I sat there resolute but dispirited. What a fool I had been to let my name be used at all! Not that I had looked upon the distinction as an empty honour. I had not yet outgrown my enthusiasm for reform; I meant to be a splendid broom, and sweep right and left, nor leave a corner untouched. But when I considered the power I had given to all who thought they could use me—when I knew that Mrs. Ellery, a subtle, designing, managing woman, who was well aware that I was no special friend to her, had nothing in view but her own selfish designs, and that she came to try and poison my wife's peace, then my heart failed me.

Presently, one by one, the gentlemen dropped in, including Mr. Barnes, a choky-looking, red-faced man, bulging out of his waistcoat, and forever fidgeting with his watch-chain; and the kind friend who had made me aware of the conspiracy.

It was some time before we got to the matter under dispute, and when we did there was much harsh talking. Presently the gentlemen were all afoot, arguing at the top of their voices.

Mr. Barnes had unearthed from the recesses of an immense pocket-book, that looked more like a portfolio, the worn and yellow infamy.

"I had great trouble in finding it; I think it is the only copy extant; but I shall use it, sir, I shall use it," he said with a flourish.

Words grew unpleasantly high. My friend hurled his anathemas at the heads of the opposition, when suddenly a soft voice was heard—

"Gentlemen!"

There stood my wife, facing us, robed in all the splendour of her most brilliant toilet, the folding doors and the dark background setting off her pale beauty to the utmost.

Her eyes glowed and widened as she moved forward, so like a queen.

"Lissa!" said I, taking a step forward. "this is no place for you."

She held up her hand, and upon my word the simple gesture silenced me.

"Gentlemen, of what bad action do you accuse my husband?"

They stared at her with admiring but half-frightened glances. Each began to make some effort at an apology.

"Mr. Barnes," said my friend, his voice toned low, "let me present to you Mrs. Harm. Perhaps you will kindly allow her to see the charges which you have been preferring against her husband."

"Any thing but that," I said, in an angry aside.