

Aunt Jane.

"Anything exciting in your letters this morning, dear?"

"Well, I don't know," said Lucy; "here's a letter from Aunt Jane."

"Aunt Jane? Did I ever meet Aunt Jane before we married?"

Lucy got up and went round the breakfast table, looking troubled.

"Tom, dear, you remember that day you asked me to be your wife?"

"Yes," he replied. "Why, what's the matter?"

"You remember I said I had an awful sin to confess—a past, a present and a future; something you might never be able to forgive?"

"Yes. I wouldn't listen." He put his arm round her.

"Well, it was—it was Aunt Jane?"

"Great Scott!" he replied. "Was it as bad as that? But I don't remember having heard of her."

"No, I kept her away—in a cupboard. I know it was wrong of me. She didn't write, to congratulate, or anything, even on our wedding day, so I thought it might be all right. I quite hoped she would forgive me, or I would have told you before, I really would."

"Well, well," he said, "it can't be helped! Who is she, and what does she do?"

"She pays visits chiefly. And she says here that she may forgive me."

"She hasn't actually done so?"

"No."

"Then why despair?" He cheered up.

"No, but she says that, though I have married an abominable man—"

"You mean to say you've never told her you've married an angel?"

"No. Would it be quite true?" she asked, simply.

"Only three months married, and you ask that?"

"Well, she says that, in spite of it all, she won't be too hard on me till she has seen you herself; that she thinks it a great mistake that young wives should ever be left alone with their husbands; that I shall always find her house a refuge and asylum when I want it—"

"Asylum!" he echoed. "Oh, is that the trouble?"

"I don't think she means that exactly," said Lucy; "but listen—this is the last sentence: 'I feel that I ought to do all I can to brighten your life, so I will come on Wednesday to stay a week or two.' Aunt Jane's invitations always were so indefinite. She always left a loophole for remaining." Lucy put the letter down and sighed.

"Only once that I can remember did she go within a month of the time that she came for, and then it was because Willy broke out all over in spots. She always had a horror of anything with spots ever since her gardener was eaten by a leopard."

"To-day is Wednesday," said Tom gloomily.

"Darling," she cried, "I shall never forgive myself for bringing this upon you!"

"It's not your fault altogether," he replied; "few of us can choose our aunts."

"Oh, there's a postscript!" she exclaimed. "Of course, the length of my visit will depend on the character of the man who has deluded you."

"Humph!" said Tom, "that's ambiguous. Will she go because I'm good and she can trust you to me or because I'm bad and she can't stand me?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Lucy. "Oh, here's another postscript. 'You will kindly remember my weakness for a hot water bottle!'"

"That throws no light," he said.

"What am I to do?"

"Never mind, darling; we must bear it together."

He clasped her fondly in his arms.

"Would you still have married me," she asked, timidly, "if you had known of this dreadful thing?"

"Yes, dear," he replied, with emotion. "I am as bad as you are; you have yet to meet my Uncle George," and he hurried off to his work with guilty haste, before she could ask any questions.

Aunt Jane arrived as threatened, punctually a quarter of an hour late. She was always a quarter of

an hour late, on principle. It arose out of a dislike for being kept waiting when asked out to dinner, for instance, and rapidly spread over the whole of her movements, owing to her morbid passion for regularity. To be late for breakfast and in time for luncheon upset her for a week, and she was scrupulously late for everything. This was annoying, unless you knew her and allowed for it; but so were most of the things Aunt Jane did. She was small, but enjoyed a deep bass voice.

"Ah, my poor child," was her greeting, "how ill you are looking."

"I didn't know it," said Lucy, meekly.

"Never mind, never mind; you've nobody to blame but yourself, and you've got to make the best of it. Give me some tea, child."

She folded her veil and sat down with an air of pity.

"Put the sugar in first, then the tea, and then count five slowly before adding the milk."

"Yes, Aunt." Long habit had taught absolute submission.

"And now tell me," said Aunt Jane, after a few minutes' general conversation, "does he yet use actual violence to you?"

Lucy looked at her in astonishment.

"Don't be afraid to tell me all, child; always tell all the truth to your doctor and your aunt. I have come here to cheer you up."

"I don't understand what you mean, Aunt."

"I quite see that you are entirely at the mercy of this man; but, of course, though I sympathize, I can't forget that you ran into it with your eyes open. Your mother did just the same, poor dear!"

"Mother had nothing to make her unhappy," said Lucy, indignantly.

"Ah, temper, temper! No, my child, I know better; I see below the surface. Trust an old woman's instinct for that. Now, don't lose your temper. You are doing so rapidly, my poor child. I don't say that you haven't plenty to try it sorely in your new life."

With much more of this Lucy felt

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that she would become hysterical. Tom was not due home for two or three hours.

The old lady chatted on cheerfully.

"You think you're happy, but I know better, poor thing. I see from your looks, from your manner, that you are utterly miserable. Now confess, haven't I guessed right?"

"I'm—I'm perfectly happy," groaned Lucy, dismally. "I mean, I was till—till—"

"Till you came," was what she wanted to say, but her courage failed.

"Till you married!" said Aunt Jane, triumphantly. "Didn't I say so?"

(To be continued.)

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