

Aunt Jane.

(Continued from last week.)

The manner of Aunt Jane had a curiously quelling effect upon all who allowed themselves to be brought under its spell. Having extracted this admission, she followed up her success by a skillful cross-examination, which reduced the poor girl to tears, and almost persuaded her that her husband was the most brutal scoundrel on earth. Every little instance of his irritability, every little protest, however gentle, about lateness of breakfast or toughness of beef, was dragged out of her by tortuous means, carefully exaggerated and embellished with details supplied from Aunt Jane's own instinct, and fitted into its place in an elaborate and highly colored mosaic of perfect villainy. And when it was done, so difficult was it to distinguish fact from fancy that Lucy was wondering how on earth she could ever have married the man at all.

"And now, my dear," said Aunt Jane, "to follow up your suggestion that he is concealing something far worse than all this"—Lucy had never suggested anything of the kind, but she saw now how probable it was—"just tell me fully anything he may have confided to you and any suspicions you may have that he is keeping anything back. There should be no secrets between a man and his wife's aunt."

"No, Aunt," said Lucy, struggling with her tears; "I quite agree."

"For instance, does he receive letters which he does not allow you to look at?"

"I—I—don't know; I never asked him," she sobbed.

"Poor child—poor, simple child! As if he would confess it. The very fact that he says nothing about those letters ought to have put you on your guard. He always gets down to breakfast before you, I'll be bound, and glazes over them in secret, eh?"

"Yes, he does usually; but—but I don't know about the glazing." She dried her eyes after each word.

"No; the housemaid would see that."

"I suppose she would."

"And doesn't it look suspicious that the housemaid hasn't told you about it? Looks like a conspiracy, doesn't it, eh?"

Lucy clenched her hands and said she ought to have suspected it; it was so obvious.

"Ah, my poor child, the obvious is so seldom visible! I find that people very often miss what to me is as clear as daylight."

Aunt Jane had never been on a scent so hot.

"And have you access to all cupboards, drawers, safes?"

"I—I think so," was the faltering reply.

"Think so!" exclaimed Aunt Jane.

"That's a pretty state of mind for a wife. Take me to his study at once! Am I not his wife's aunt?"

This was said because Lucy seemed to hesitate. Together they went to the study. Aunt Jane sniffed contemptuously.

"Smoke!" she snorted. "He smokes?"

Lucy admitted it.

"And drinks, I've no doubt?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"And plays cards?"

"I—I think so, a little."

"Poor dear, poor dear! What more do you want? Now show me this secret drawer you were complaining of." She hadn't complained of any, but pulled the handles of several, and at last found one that wouldn't open.

"There you are!" came the triumphant cry. "Have you ever seen inside that?"

Lucy couldn't remember that she had or had ever wanted to.

"Doesn't it fit in wonderfully?" said Aunt Jane. "In there lie the letters over which he and the housemaid gloat in the early morning!"

Lucy saw it all clearly.

"And I've no doubt that there have been times when he has told you, with a pretence of sympathy, not to be in a hurry to get up?"

Lucy did remember one or two instances, when she had a slight cold. Aunt Jane chuckled.

"I never met a married couple

yet who oughtn't to be divorced at once," she said. "This must be finally settled this evening, and I will stay by your side till he gives a satisfactory explanation. He never will; it won't bear explanation."

"I am very grateful to you, Aunt," said Lucy.

"Show me my room, poor thing; I always take a rest before dinner."

"I am sure you must require it," said Lucy, leading the way upstairs.

"And mind," said Aunt Jane at the door, "not a word to him about this till I tackle him; you would only put him on his guard and give him an opportunity of destroying the only evidence we have."

"I will not mention it," said Lucy, humbly.

When Tom came in he was not met at the door, as usual, by his wife. He thought it strange, but supposed she was looking after her guest. When he came down to the drawing-room, punctually, Lucy was alone there, looking gloomily into the fire. She did not turn on his entrance.

"Well, my dear," he said, cheerily, "has our sin come home to us?"

"If you mean," replied Lucy, with hauteur, "has my dear Aunt Jane arrived, she has."

"That's what I meant," he said, a little surprised. "And am I to be a model or an awful example?"

"It is not necessary for me to teach you to wear the cloak of hypocrisy," she replied, with tears coming to her eyes.

He raised his eyebrows. "Why, what on earth—what's the matter, dear?"

He tried to kiss her, but she drew away from him. She was sobbing bitterly.

"You ask me," she said, "you, with all those—with all that—"

She nearly flung the guilty letters in his teeth, but remembered her aunt's warning just in time.

"With all those what?" he asked, bewildered. But not another word could he get from her, and he was

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standing looking at her with an expression of utter amazement when Aunt Jane sailed in, a quarter of an hour late. She required no introduction.

"You are the man, I suppose?" she said, with a snap of the teeth. He bowed.

"How do you do, Aunt Jane?" he said. "I hope you had a pleasant journey."

"So-so. No thanks to you!"

"Dear Aunt Jane," he said softly, "I wired to the porters to be polite." It was clear that he did not take her serious, and Lucy was indignant.

"I hear," said Aunt Jane, as they settled round the dinner table, "that you are a lawyer."

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