

TRIED BY FIRE.

BY ELLEN M. MITCHELL.

I was nervous and discontented that night. My husband had scarcely looked up from his writing for the last two hours, and was so absorbed that he had apparently forgotten my very existence. There wasn't any one else to talk to except the pictures on the walls, even the old hat gone into the kitchen, and I found it dull and lonesome enough. I tried tatting, crocheting and reading, but all to no purpose; the demon that possessed me would not be exorcised.

My life at aunt Amy's had been so different. There everything was bright and cheerful, with plenty of talk and laughter and gaiety, and the little house was never so full that it couldn't accommodate one more guest. Aunt Amy, the only mother I had ever known, was a dear, bustling little body, brimful of kindness and hospitality, and it was seldom that she wore a sour look. Toward me, her orphan niece, she was particularly gentle and forbearing, for, with the exception of herself and children, I had no living kindred, at least, so far as I knew. A half brother of mine had left home when I was a child on account of some domestic difficulty, and had never been heard from since, and whether he was among the living or dead we could not tell.

Aunt Amy was the good genius of my life and looking back now I am afraid that she and her big boys spoiled me a little, for I was the only daughter of the house, and there was no one to dispute my way. Never had queen a happier girlhood, or more obedient subjects than mine. I remember how surprised and shocked they all were when aunt Amy disclosed the fact that Robert Allan had asked me to be his wife.

"Why, he wears spectacles, and is as grey as a rat," said Jimmy, indignantly (Jimmy was the youngest, and my favorite cousin). "And to think that he has the impudence to come and court Lucy, when I've been intending all the while to marry her myself. I won't put up with it, that I won't. Let him go and propose to that jolly little widow, Mrs. Ketchum, or anybody else he wants to; but if he is seen around our house again I will be the worse for him, that is all."

"Indeed it will, and no mistake," said Hugh, the eldest (he was twenty, and two years my senior). "Lucy is hardly out of pantalettes yet, and oughtn't to think of marrying these ten years. A pretty wife she'd make that old curmudgeon."

"Too pretty, by far," answered Joe, another cousin, who stood biting his nails, a habit he had when vexed. "If she can't find a husband younger and better looking than he is she might as well stay single. But what do you think, mother?"

"Lucy is old enough to decide for herself," said aunt Amy, smiling, "and has already done so, subject, of course, to my advice and approval. Mr. Allan is a man of worth and integrity, and there is no greater disparity of ages between him and Lucy than there was between your father and myse f. He is only thirty-five, but his gray hairs and near-sightedness make him look much older."

"Has Lucy said yes?" chorused the three together.

Aunt Amy nodded her head in assent. There was a general groan of disapproval, and it was several days before my friendly advances met with any response from either of the boys. Aunt Amy expostulated with me afterward.

"I am afraid, dear, that Mr. Allan is not the kind of man you ought to marry," said she, gently. "There is a greater contrast than you think between his nature and yours; one gloomy and taciturn, the other genial and sunny. Can you bridge over the chasm that divides you and be happy as his wife? That is the question. In the new life you are to enter upon together he will look to you for comfort and sympathy, you to him for amusement and companionship; will these always be found of the kind and degree desired? He is neither impulsive nor demonstrative; you are both, and so sensitive that a word or look will sometimes give you the heartache. Oh, Lucy, think of it well before you take this man as your husband. He is older, graver and wiser than yourself, and only 'love that exceedeth all things' can sanctify the union."

"But if he was not different from all, I shouldn't like him," returned I. "That is the reason we are so fond of each other. I'm his little sunbeam, at least that is what he says, and I return the compliment by calling him an 'old ogre.' Why, you don't know anything about it, and we are exactly suited to each other, and if we hadn't happened to meet, should have been miserable all our lives."

I remembered all this to-night with a pang. And in spite of my longing to see aunt Amy, I fairly dreaded her promised visit, fearing that she would discover the secret I strove so hard to conceal. For I was not happy as the wife of Robert Allan. Not that I loved him any less than in those halcyon courtship days when I spoke so hopefully of the future; he was even dearer to me now than then, but there was a gravity and reserve in his demeanor that somehow interposed a barrier between us, and seemed to drive us farther apart daily. I fancied that he was tired of his girl-wife, and found her less of a companion than he anticipated, for I was only too conscious of my own ignorance and his superior knowledge. I would have improved myself, and "reached upward to his level," but

he smiled good-naturedly when I told him so, and hinted that his favorite pursuits were not such as women usually find interesting. Mechanics, engineering, and similar studies were those in which he took chief delight, and I have seen him show such excitement and enthusiasm over a little inanimate piece of machinery as fairly made me jealous.

He owned a large iron foundry just within sight of the house where we lived, and it was there that he spent most of his time when away from me. I could see it in the moonlight behind yonder trees, looming up black and solemn, and I don't know why, but a shiver of dread and apprehension for which I could not account, came over me at the sight.

My husband looked up suddenly, and discovered me at the window. "What, Lucy, not gone to bed yet?" and he drew out his watch. "You ought to have been asleep an hour ago."

He treated me like a child. I felt the hot blood leap up into my forehead, but said nothing. Neither did I stir, and after a swift scrutiny of my face he resumed his writing.

Half an hour afterward he laid down his pen, and turned to me again. "Lucy, my dear, pardon me for saying it, but I would like to be alone. I have an intricate task before me, and much depends on its being finished to-night. Your presence disturbs me, how or why I cannot tell, but there is something that comes between me and the paper, and distracts my attention. Please don't be offended, will you?"

But I was, though too proud to own it, and when he came over to where I stood, and put his arm around me caressingly—a rare action on his part—I shook it off in spite of the secret surprise and pleasure I felt, and hurried out of the room without a word or look in reply.

Up to my chamber I fled, and seating myself by the open window—I had no intention of going to bed—wondered why I had been treated so unceremoniously. For it had never happened before; however much absorbed my husband was with his books or studies, he had seemed rather glad of my presence than otherwise, and there was either something peculiar in his work to-night, or he wanted to get rid of me for other reasons.

I doubted his motives. Three days before he had received a letter in a strange, cramped handwriting. I noticed the envelope as it lay on the table, and had trembled and turned pale as he hurriedly scanned its contents. I was watching him closely, and saw him look toward me with sudden fright and apprehension when I inquired with pretended indifference, "who it was from." He did not tell me, nor give any explanation whatever of his singular conduct.

This was not all. Last night just as the clock was striking twelve, I awakened suddenly, and from some impulse hard to define, jumped up and went to the window. Two men were talking together in the shrubbery, and thinking they were burglars, I was about to give the alarm, when I recognized one of them as my husband. The other was a villainous-looking character, wearing a cloak and slouched hat. I couldn't distinguish what either said, but judged that the subject of conversation wasn't a pleasant one from their threatening looks and gestures. It was one o'clock before they parted, and I noticed that my husband's step was slow and heavy when he came toward the house. The strangeness of the occurrence kept me awake a long time, and I wondered and wondered what could have been the business that was transacted between these two at such a mysterious hour, and in such a mysterious way.

And now to-night there was to be another interview, I felt confident. It was for this that my husband hurried me off to bed, and showed such eagerness to be alone; and it was for this that I resolved to watch and wait.

The more I thought of it, the more I was puzzled in trying to solve the question as to who the man could have been, and for what purpose he sought my husband. Robert Allan's integrity had never been questioned; and yet there was something strange and suspicious in the way he was acting now. I knew not what to make of it; and I almost wished that I could blot out from my memory the remembrance, both of the letter and the midnight meeting, for somehow I associated the two together. It isn't pleasant to distrust one's husband, or any one else that we love.

One little ray of hope cheered my perplexity. It might be some one from the foundry who had invented a new piece of machinery, and wanted to introduce it secretly, and in any such enterprise my husband would have been sure to lend a helping hand. But this didn't look so reasonable as I tried to make it. For there were plenty of opportunities in the daytime when a plan like this could have been matured. Nor did it account for the agitation my husband had shown—agitation that was plainly of an unpleasant, instead of a pleasant character. And for more than a week past he had worn a moody, troubled look, and been unusually silent. I was too proud to ask any questions; but oh! how I longed to comfort him, and take the wife's true place at his side. I was hurt that he should hide from me even the most trivial secret, and here was something that perhaps I ought to know, carefully concealed.

I felt justified, therefore, in the course I pursued. Under other circumstances I might have thought it mean and unwomanly to watch my husband, but the mystery that invested this affair drew me forward almost in spite of my will, and at the same time filled me with dread and terror.

So I waited silently behind the curtains, and a little past midnight my vigil was rewarded. Noiselessly my husband stole from the house,

and was joined outside by the same man whom I had seen on the previous night. He looked even more like a ruffian than before. Their talk was carried on in low voices, but every now and then I caught a few words.

My husband seemed to be urging the man to keep some promise he had made, of what nature I could not discover, but I heard him say gruffly—

"I'll do it; but let's see the money first." And then, was it possible? A large roll of notes was slipped into his hand, and he counted them, chuckling.

"It's not enough," said he, angrily. "I'm not to be bought so cheap as that. Come, hand over some more, or I'll call on your lady-wife in the morning, and tell her a certain little secret you wouldn't like her to know."

"Never!" said my husband firmly. "I would shoot you in a minute if you did."

The man swore a fearful oath, and my husband, looking up at the house as if fearful of discovery, dragged him further along out of hearing. But I saw them point to the foundry once or twice, as if that had something to do with the matter they were discussing—and I was nearly paralyzed with horror when, just as they were separating, the man drew a rope out of his pocket and made a feint of hanging himself. My husband turned away with a gesture that seemed like disdain, and left him standing there. He gesticulated wildly a minute or two, and then disappeared.

Cold and trembling, I hurried into bed, ashamed that I had acted the part of a spy, and fearful that my husband would find it out. But when a little later he came into the room, he was apparently so tired and worn out, that, kissing me softly on the forehead, he at once fell asleep. Whatever were the secret relations that existed between him and his midnight visitor, they were not of such a nature as to keep him awake.

I pondered over what I had seen and heard, and puzzled my brain with conjecture after conjecture as to what it might mean, until I, too, overcame by fatigue and weariness, lost consciousness. How long I slept I know not, but a confused cry of "Fire! Fire!" was sounding in my ears when I awoke. Whether it was a dream or reality I could not make out at first—but again and again it came, louder and shriller, "Fire! Fire!" and there was the heavy tramp of feet outside, and a continuous pounding at doors and windows, and, yes, a bolt of lurid light shot into the room.

I jumped out of bed, and rushed to the window—and oh, merciful God! what did I see? The foundry was one mass of glowing, seething, crackling flames.

Faint and dizzy, I turned toward the bed, where, in spite of the noise and confusion, my husband still slept. Oh! the terrible suspicion that was born of that moment. The foundry was insured; could it, could it be the man I had seen was the incendiary? Was it for this my husband had given him money, and he had tried to extort more? I remembered his words, and the terrible pantomime through which he had gone, and my heart sank in my bosom. Had he pictured the risk he ran as a convincing proof that it ought to be better paid? I attempted to strangle these unworthy doubts, but they persisted in rising up before me, one after another, like horrible spectres.

Frenzied with fear I stood in the middle of the room, and brighter shone the flames, and louder rose the voices outside. Waking, my husband saw me thus. He understood it all in a moment.

"Oh, my God, the foundry is on fire!" and a groan of horror burst from his lips, and his face grew pale as ashes. Hurrying on his clothes, I heard him mutter to himself, "The wretch has kept his word."

I could not shed a tear, nor speak a word of comfort.

"Poor little Lucy!" said he tenderly, thinking my silence the result of fright.

"Mr. Allan! Mr. Allan!" shouted voices from below.

"Yes, yes, in a minute," he replied. "Will you go down too, Lucy?"

I shook my head.

"Then I'll send Norah up to stay with you."

She came, wringing her hands, and full of voluble Irish sympathy. I sat and listened for over two hours in apathetic indifference. These words aroused me at last:

"And they do say, Miss Lucy, that it was set on fire, for all at once the flames burst out in ever so many places, and there's been a strange man seen prowling around the yard for several days past."

It seemed as if I could hear my heart beat.

"Did they tell you how he looked?" and I strove to speak composedly.

"Oh, yes," and then she gave a description that corresponded exactly with that of the man I suspected.

"But what could have been his object?" queried I, finding a strange fascination in the subject.

"Don't know, suppose he had a grudge against master."

"What are you talking about, Norah?" said my husband sternly. He had entered the room unobserved.

She hesitated, stammered, and finally told him the truth. I saw his lips quiver with a spasm of pain, and a dark frown settle on his forehead. But I didn't more than half understand the plying, deprecating look he turned toward me.

"Say nothing more of this," commanded he. "It is all a mistake. The fire wasn't accidental, it was not the work of an incendiary."

"Oh, sir, but you don't know that, and all the men say—"

"Never mind what the men say, but go to bed, Norah."

"Go to bed!" exclaimed she, indignantly.

"Why, it is nearly morning."

"Well, then, do as you like. Only be careful of one thing. Don't let me hear of your spreading any such absurd report as that the foundry was set on fire."

His eyes flashed ominously. So did hers.

"I'd give you notice, sir, this minute if it wasn't for mistress," and she bounced out of the room with more haste than dignity.

My husband smiled, and then taking my hand, said sadly, "Oh! Lucy, pity me. It is such a blow. The work of years destroyed in a night. Yonder is all that is left of my foundry."

I looked in the direction he pointed. A dense column of smoke rose from the charred ruins. Every now and then a tongue of flame leapt out. But the fire had done its work; its glow and sparkle and splendor had vanished.

"Was nothing saved?" I asked the question without looking in his face.

"Nothing," he repeated bitterly. "I can say to you what I would not admit to Norah. There is reason to think it was set on fire. It caught in several places at the same time apparently."

"But who, who could have done it?" faltered I.

There was a long silence, broken at length by the sound of his voice. It was strange and unnatural. "I have suffered a grievous wrong," said he, "but can do nothing. There are secret reasons why I do not wish this affair investigated by the law. The mischief is wrought; the discovery of the criminal cannot restore my foundry."

"But he ought not to go unpunished," replied I, indignantly.

"Let him settle that with his conscience. Believe me, Lucy, I am the best judge in this matter."

"And have you no fear that your motives will be questioned? Does not your insurance nearly cover your loss?"

He looked at me curiously. "Why, no, not exactly," and he hesitated. "But these are strange questions for you to ask. What put them into your head?"

His voice was so kind and tender, and my heart ached so beneath its burden of doubt and distrust that I should have told him everything I knew and suspected, if it hadn't been for Norah who just then opened the door.

"There was a man here just now who left this for you, sir," said she, smiling, and holding out a letter, her short-lived anger all gone.

My husband took it, tore open the envelope, and having read the slip of paper it contained, rushed out of the room like a madman. The envelope he kept, the enclosure he dropped accidentally and without perceiving the loss. I picked it up after he was gone.

Trembling all over, I took the paper to the light. The following words were scrawled upon it in the same cramped handwriting I had seen before. "I have done as I said I would. It was my hand that set fire to the foundry. Are you satisfied now that I keep my word? Your secret is safe only so long as mine is. Be careful then what measures you take."

Here was a fearful proof that my husband had been implicated in the crime of this man. I examined the writing, word by word, then held it up in the flame of the gas until it shrivelled to ashes. Who could tell what might happen? Better that this evidence of guilt were destroyed.

It was soon before my husband returned. He looked fazed and worn.

"Pardon me, Lucy, for leaving you so abruptly," said he, "but I couldn't help myself. Important business claimed my attention."

He hadn't mislaid the letter, I was sure of that.

"Have you been over to the ruins yet?" continued he. "It is a sad sight. There is nothing left of the foundry but a few charred and blackened timbers. The poor workmen feel the loss almost as much as I do."

"More perhaps." The words leapt out in spite of myself.

"Impossible. Oh, Lucy, if you only knew all."

I fancied that I did; it was a knowledge from which I sought to escape.

"Do you still think it was set on fire?" I tried to ask the question unconcernedly.

"It is hard to tell," was his guarded answer.

"That was the general opinion at first; people seem to think differently now. It might have caught accidentally."

"But you know in your heart that it did not," said I, emphatically.

He seemed surprised. "Why, Lucy, one would almost think, to hear you talk, that I had something to do with it."

"You had?" was the accusation that sprang to my lips. But I kept it back, and he went on, "That is not what you mean, of course. You referred to what I said this morning. Try to forget it; I shall."

"As you please," returned I. My voice sounded hard and cold, and he looked at me even more attentively than before.

"I have already seen an architect," said he, "and shall commence re-building the foundry at once. That the new one will be superior to the old, I've no doubt, and yet it will never seem the same to me, for my heart was so bound up in that foundry and the machinery it contained, that I feel almost as if I had lost a living friend. It isn't the destruction of the property alone that hurts me so; it is the loss