

There was another pause.

"Dick, dear I'd rather not go without you," she said, meekly, at last.

"And I'd rather you would go without me! I said angrily. The Wilson's are our best friends, and I won't have them slighted."

"Then why not come, Dick, dear," said the little woman, and I could see she was struggling to keep down her tears.

"Because I've no time for such frivolity. There, you have wasted enough of my time already, so go."

Scratch, scratch, scratch went that exasperating pen, as I went on writing more stuff to cancel, and yet too weak and angry to leave off like a sensible man, run up and change my things, and accompany my wife to the pleasant and social gathering a few doors lower down our road.

She had been looking forward to the visit as a treat. So had I until that gloomy fit came over me; but as I had taken the step already made, I felt that I could not retreat without looking foolish, so I acted with that usual wisdom displayed by men under such circumstances and made matters worse.

"Did you hear me say that I wished you to go alone?" I said angrily.

"Yes, yes, Dick, dear, I'll go if you wish," Mattie said very meekly; "but, indeed I'd rather stay at home."

"You are desired to go; you have a rose in your hair," I said satirically—oh, that poor satire, when it was put there to please me! "and they expect you; so now go—and enjoy yourself," I added, by way of a sting to my speech.

"I can't enjoy myself, Dick," she said gently, unless you come, too. Let me stay."

"I desire you to go!" I exclaimed banging my hand down on the desk.

She looked at me with the great tears standing in her piteous eyes, and then, coming nearer, she bent over and kissed my forehead.

"Will you come and fetch me, Dick?" she said, softly.

"Yes—no—perhaps—I don't know," I said, roughly, as I repelled her caresses; and then, looking wistfully at me, she went away slowly to the door, glided out and was gone.

That broke the spell, and I started from my seat, but more angry than ever. I was wroth with her for obeying me so meekly, and I gently opened the door, to hear her call her maid and tell her to accompany her as far as the Wilson's.

Then I heard them go—heard the girl return, and the door close, and I was alone.

Alone? Well, not exactly; for so to speak, I was having an interview with my angry self, as I felt that I was asking how I could let a feeling of annoyance act upon my better nature and make me behave as I did to the sweet little girlish being who, during the six months we had been married, had never looked at me but with the eyes of love.

"Change your things and go after her," something seemed to say, but I repelled it, threw my writing aside, kicked off my boots, snatched my slippers out of the sideboard, thrust the easy chair in front of the cosy fire, threw myself into it, and then with my feet on the fender and my hands in my pockets, I sat, morose, bitter and uncomfortable, gazing at the glowing embers.

"She had no business to go!" I exclaimed. "She knew I was up all last night, writing that abominable book, and was out of sorts, and ought to have stayed."

Then I reviewed the past half hour, and grew calmer as I leaned back, knowing as I did, that I forced her to go, poor child, and how miserable she would be.

"She'll forget it among all those people," I said bitterly;

but I did not believe it, and at last I sat there calling myself ass, idiot, blind madman, to plant, as I had, the first seed of what might grow into a very upas-tree of dissension, and blight the whole of our married life.

"Poor little darling!" I said at last; "I'll wait up till she comes home, and then tell her how sorry I am for my folly, and ask her forgiveness."

"But, as a man, can I do that?" I said. "Will it not be weak?"

"Never mind!" I exclaimed, "I'll do it! Surely, there can be no braver thing to do than to own one's self in the wrong. Life is too short to blur it with petty quarrels. And suppose she was taken ill to-night—my darling whom I love with all my heart! Or, suppose she went too near the fire and her dress caught alight. There, how absurd! Thank goodness she is in silk, and not in one of them flyaway muslins!"

I sat on musing and musing, till suddenly there was a buzz outside the house, and the rush of feet. I fancied I heard the word "fire!" repeated again and again, and turning to the window, there was a glow which lighted the whole place.

I dashed down stairs, and out of the door to find the road thronged, for a house a little lower down was in flames, and, to my horror, I had not taken a dozen steps before I found that it was our friends', the Wilsons'.

There was no engine, but a crowd of excited people, talking eagerly; and just then the fire escape came trundling along the road.

It was quite time, for the house, as I reached it, was blazing furiously, the flames darted out in long, fiery tongues from half the upper windows, while at several there were people piteously crying for help.

I found my way through the crowd, and tried to run up to the house but, half-a-dozen officious people held me back, while the men with the escape tried to rear it against the house; but it would not reach because of the garden in front, so that they had to get the wheels of the escape over the iron railing, and this caused great delay.

"Let me go!" I panted to those who held me. "Let me go! Some one—some one is in the house."

"You can't do any good, sir," said a policeman, roughly, "The escape men will do all they can."

But I struggled frantically and got loose, feeling all the time a horrible, despairing sensation, as I knew that my poor darling was one of the shrieking supplicants for help at the upper windows and that but for my folly I might have saved her.

As I freed myself from those who held me, and ran to the escape it was to find that the man who had ascended it had just been beaten back by the flames.

"It's no good," he said "we must try the back."

He was about to drag the machine away when I heard my name called, "Dick! Dick!" in piteous tones; and as I was once more seized, I shook myself free, rushed up the ladder, with the flames scorching and burning my face, and panting breathlessly, I reached a window where Mattie stood stretching out her hands.

I got astride the sill, the flames being wafted away from me, and threw my arms around her; but as I did so the ladder gave way, burned through by the flames that gushed furiously from the lower window, and I felt that I must either jump or descend by the staircase.

There was no time for thinking, so I climbed in, lifted Mattie in my arms, feeling her dress crumble in my hands