

agent—he says—he says he'll turn us out of doors to-morrow unless I pay the rent, and I haven't any money—and it's cold—and it's snowing dreadfully. Oh, what can I do,—what can I do?

Mrs. Blair patted her gently on the knee.

'Don't cry! You must not cry like that. Of course you can not pay. I am sure my husband wouldn't think of taking money from any one who isn't well off,' she said kindly. She had but vague impractical ideas of business matters.

'I wouldn't mind much for myself,' Mrs. Busch went on, cheered, though she was not convinced that Mr. Blair would view the case in exactly the same light as did his wife. 'I wouldn't mind for myself, but it would kill Alice to be turned out into this weather. It's very cold,—you've no idea! If it was only me I'd manage somehow—*anyhow*. Maybe you've got a little girl or boy of your own; then you know just how it is.'

Rather sadly Mrs. Blair shook her head.

'But I'll tell my husband all about it. It's an outrage! Such an agent! So cruel and unreasonable!' Then her eyes, wandering about the room, rested on the flowers, and an idea occurred to her. 'I am going to send these roses to your little Alice,—that's her name, is it not?'

'Yes—Alice. And you're—you're very kind, ma'am; but they'd freeze before I'd get them home. I have about six miles to walk, and I—'

'Oh, yes, they would freeze. I had not thought of that,' Mrs. Blair agreed. She felt sympathetic and longed to help, but had no idea what to do. 'I—that is, you can live in the Century Building just as long as you like without paying any rent. I am sure it won't matter at all. We couldn't think of taking your little bit of money,' she said, after a pause.

Mrs. Busch's pride was almost dead: years of poverty and struggle had done their worst by it; but a faint spark of it flared up at this.

'I'm not asking any charity. I've always paid my way, as my father and mother did before me, and I intend to keep on. I'm only asking *time*. I'll pay all I owe when I can work regular again. It's only on account of Alice that I—I—oh, if you could only understand how it is. She's so cold these days, and I can't help it, and I can't get half enough for her to eat. We try to pretend we're not hungry, but it's hard, and she's so little and sickly.'

Mrs. Blair stared at her, amazed.

'You're not hungry' she gasped. '*Hungry!* I've heard Father Daly say that many people are, but I didn't know he really meant it, or else I didn't quite understand. You must not be hungry.' Then, as Mrs. Busch suddenly remembered the lateness of the hour and rose to go, she added: 'No, no! You must not leave just yet!'

She rang the bell, and told the maid who came to get whatever food she could find in the pantry and ice chest and give it to Mrs. Busch; then, practical for once, she corrected herself.

'But no; it would be better to order one of the machines and load the things into it.'

While they waited Mrs. Blair plied Mrs. Busch with questions, kindly meant; and, although their blunt tactlessness sometimes made the poor woman wince, she was too grateful not to answer them all, readily and fully.

'It's very strange the way you live. I have heard of such things but had never believed they really existed,' Mrs. Blair slowly said at last, and would have added more in the same strain if the automobile had not been announced at that moment.

When, with some difficulty, Mrs. Busch had been crowded into it, among packages of such food as she had never tasted, Mrs. Blair gave her the tips of her jewelled fingers, saying:

'Now, don't worry about the rent. I will tell Mr. Blair all about it when he reaches home. I'll tell him everything you said. He will be so interested!'

Only a few minutes later, Mrs. Blair, wandering aimlessly through the rooms, in a fever of impatience for her husband's coming, heard his low voice in the

reception hall, and, running to him, kissed him far more effusively than usual.

'Oh, I have something to tell you!' she began eagerly. 'A poor woman was here,—so poor! You have no idea how poor people can be! She has two rooms in the Century Building and she can't pay her rent, but I told her you wouldn't mind. I knew you wouldn't. Mr. Coale, that agent of yours, has been horrid, and he—'

'My! my! Julia! Can't you let a man get rid of his coat before you pounce upon him?' her husband interrupted somewhat irritably. 'I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about.'

He gave his hat and coat to the man and went slowly toward the library. Mrs. Blair followed, explaining further:

'The woman was here only a little while ago. Such a sad-looking woman, and very thin and white! If you had come a few minutes earlier, you could have seen her. But I promised her that I would tell you all about it as soon as you reached home. It's to-morrow she is to be turned out, if she does not pay; and she can't, you know; she has no money. For months she has had nothing to do, except some laundry work. Did you know that there actually are people here in this city as poor as that?'

Mr. Blair had dropped into a big chair and was leaning back, with his eyes closed. He looked weary and harassed, but his wife was thinking only of Mrs. Busch.

'You're listening, aren't you, John?' she asked, checking her torrent of incoherent explanation. 'You understand, don't you? You will tell Mr. Coale the first thing in the morning, won't you?'

Mr. Blair made no reply; and his wife, looking at him for the first time, asked after a puzzled silence:

'You are not tired, are you, John?'

'Yes, very tired, mind and body. I have had a long, hard, anxious day.' He opened his eyes, and, leaning forward, began to explain a little, forgetting for the moment how useless he had long ago learned it to be. 'These are anxious times in the business world. The whole country is in the grip of a money panic. You see, Julia, it—'

Mrs. Blair playfully put her finger to her ears.

'No, no John! I won't listen! I wouldn't understand. I don't care about money. What's the use of bothering about it?'

'No use at all!' her husband snapped; and, opening the evening paper without another word, he hid himself behind it.

Mrs. Blair knew well that he did not like to be disturbed when he was reading. He was apt to be 'cross' if she talked to him then; but this was an exceptional and urgent case, she argued, and he would be interested, if only he could be made to listen. He could not help it. Besides, he must act early the following morning, or it would be too late.

'It was nice of Mrs. Busch—that is the poor woman's name,—it was nice of her to come to us for help, wasn't it? She doesn't blame the agent, and she doesn't want charity. She said so. She seemed almost angry for a minute, because she thought I imagined that she did. You will speak to Mr. Coale about her to-morrow morning, won't you?'

No answer from Mr. Blair,—no evidence that he heard.

'It will be too late to-morrow afternoon,' she tried again, after what she deemed a long silence. 'She has a little girl who is always ill. It must be awful to be ill all the time, don't you think so? Do you remember how miserable you were when you had influenza, and how anxious to get well in a hurry? Suppose you were ill all the time! And Alice Busch is only a little mite, five years old. I think her mother said she is five, but perhaps it was six she said.'

There was another silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock and the rustle of Mr. Blair's paper, before his wife ventured again:

'I told her you do not want rent from people unless it is easy for them to pay.'