

Mr. Blair lowered his paper sufficiently to glare at her over the top of it.

'I am trying to read,' he said; and hid himself once more.

A few seconds later dinner was announced, or it is probable that Mrs. Blair would have renewed the attack. No one had ever accused her of lacking persistence. Mr. Blair did not obey the summons promptly; but when he rose, dropping his paper, he put his arm about his wife's shoulder as they went to the dining-room. He was sorry he had been so brusque, but all he said by way of apology was:

'You don't know how tired I am this evening. I feel as if I should like to rest forever. I am glad we have no engagement.'

Mrs. Blair, because she saw that his good-humor was restored, and because he had no newspaper at hand to protect him, felt the moment surely auspicious to interest him in Mrs. Busch.

'She has had the same rooms for four or five years, and always paid promptly until lately,' she said.

Mr. Blair frowned.

'Who is this woman you have been talking about for the past three-quarters of an hour? Why am I expected to be interested in her?'

'If you would but listen, John, when I explain, you would know all about her: but you get cross as soon as I say a word.'

If there is one thing an irritable person finds more trying than all others it is to be called 'cross' or 'impatient,' or by any kindred epithet: so it was not in his most amiable manner that Mr. Blair rejoined:

'Well, tell me the whole story, if you must; and after that let's be done with it once for all. You will give me no peace until I have been bored with every word you said and she said, and a hundred more neither of you ever thought of saying.'

Mrs. Blair pouted for an instant before her desire to tell her story proved stronger than her resentment: then she related, in her provokingly desultory manner, the narrative of her afternoon's experience. Mr. Blair sat mute.

'You don't seem to be interested, John. You are hardly listening, and you haven't asked one question.'

'Oh, yes, I am listening and am intensely interested! But *do* come to the point. What was the woman crying about? No doubt that is the kernel of the story.'

'Mrs. Busch cried because she has no money, and she is going to be put out of her rooms to-morrow if she doesn't pay her rent; and her little girl is sick, and may die if she has to go out in the cold and the snow. You would cry, too, if you were in her place,' she retorted, indignantly.

'And her name is Busch, I think you said, and it's the Century Building.'

'Yes; and she wouldn't mind very much if she were alone,—she said so. The little girl has always been ill, and they are often cold in winter, and in summer they have no ice; and sometimes they are hungry—'

'So am I!' Mr. Blair murmured.

'But not in the same way. They have nothing to eat,—nothing at all!'

'Now, Julia, suppose we change the subject. I think, possibly, we could find a more cheerful one. There is no one else on earth about whom I have quite as much information as I have about this Mrs. Busch. I know all about her tears and her long walk, her clothes, her appearance, her child, and her financial status. I can't say that I yearn to learn more.'

Mrs. Blair had succeeded in making him listen to the story from beginning to end. She was delighted with her success, and never easily annoyed: so she paid no heed to this tirade, but smiled absently while it was in progress and at its close: and after a pause Mr. Blair said, almost in his ordinary tone:

'I wonder if you realise what a severe snowstorm we are having,—the worst in many years. I don't remember ever to have seen such drifts. They say that the street car service is very much crippled, and trains are blocked all over the State.'

'Yes?' Mrs. Blair said listlessly, not interested. 'You won't forget about Mrs. Busch?' she reminded him, after scarcely a pause.

'No, no!' he answered shortly, trying to be patient; and began to felicitate himself that at length the subject was considered finished when the meal passed without any further reference to it; and on their returning to the library Mrs. Blair buried herself in a new magazine. He really was inexpressibly weary, and harassed by a score of anxieties, involving millions of dollars of his own and other people's money besides. Leaving untouched his half-read paper, he leaned against the back of his chair and shut his eyes, with a deep sense of thankfulness that he could rest. But the lull was short-lived. His wife was not engrossed in her story. After a few minutes she closed the magazine. Her husband sighed.

'I told her you would not allow her to be turned out of her rooms,' she remarked exultingly.

Mr. Blair made no answer, but he frowned darkly.

'John, wouldn't it be lovely never again to charge her or any other poor people? We don't want poor people's money, do we? Tell Mr. Coale not to, won't you? Or shall I?'

Mr. Blair was angry at last.

'Please do not meddle with my business affairs! I shall tell Mr. Coale nothing of the kind: and if I hear one word more about this matter, I will do nothing. I mean every word I say.'

Naturally he was obstinate, and nature had the upper hand in that hour; but his wife had never learned when to be silent.

'O John, you don't mean that! I know you don't! You will interfere, won't you, John?'

'No!' he answered roughly. 'Once and for all, I wash my hands of the whole affair. It's the agent's business. Why should I meddle?'

Still Mrs. Blair did not understand that he was in earnest. After a scarcely perceptible pause, she said sweetly, her baby smile playing about her lips:

'I told Mrs. Busch that Mr. Coale really has no authority. The building is yours, isn't it, John?'

'Why on earth did you tell her that? He has,—of course he has! I did intend to interfere in this case, though it would have been a trouble, and a thing that, in general, I don't approve of. Now I shall do nothing. Do you understand?'

At last it dawned upon Mrs. Blair that her husband was thoroughly angry, and she had best be silent. That he meant to carry out his threat did not even occur to her: and she went to bed feeling light-hearted, because she had saved their home to a poor woman and her child.

Forty-eight hours later Mr. Blair was ensconced in his library, pouring over the evening paper. He had had a singularly gratifying day. The steps he had taken to safeguard his own and others' interests had proved successful beyond his most sanguine hopes. He had had an excellent dinner, during which he and his wife had chatted happily, without any of the miniature quarrels that ordinarily marred their intercourse. He was feeling supremely content, satisfied with himself and all the world, until in a corner of the first page of his paper he found this short paragraph:

'Yesterday morning Mrs. Busch, a widow, with her five-year-old child, was turned out of her wretched rooms in the Century Building. At one time she was employed by Hart and Co., shirt makers: but for the past six months has been out of work. The child was seriously ill; and, with her in her arms, the mother walked the streets for hours before she found shelter with the Sisters of Mercy on De Sales Avenue. She was exhausted and almost frozen. The child died early this morning as the result of the exposure. The Century Building is owned by J. C. Blair.'

It is hard to imagine the agony that descended upon Mr. Blair as he read. Minute after minute passed, and he sat staring at the article, his face ashy white, his hands trembling so that the paper shook like a leaf in the wind. He felt that he must scream aloud in his anguish; that he could not live and bear, hour after