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TOWANDA:

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Selected Tale.

MY SISTER'S HUSBAND.

I was the youngest of a handsome family. My three sisters, each in her way, were very pretty; but I, the youngest, and with a natural right to be the pet of the house, was never either a beauty or a favorite. My rights in the matter of favoritism were, and from the first day of her existence had been entirely monopolized by my third sister, Caroline. I was not, however, envious of that; it doubtless, suited her better to be made a pet, than it would have suited me. My lack of beauty I did regret; but as that want could not be remedied, I endeavored to become reconciled to the face and figure God had given me.—These were both small, and the first sallow and thin. It boasted, however, and boasts still, of at least one striking feature, a pair of large black eyes.

My two eldest sisters were married while I was still a girl at school. They both became the wives of military men, and both within a year of their marriage, accompanied their husbands to India. I have never seen either of them since. My third sister, however remained at home, and there I joined her when, a girl of seventeen, my school life ended.

I was fond of Caroline, and she too, I believe, of me, yet her affection was by no means that of an elder sister for a younger.—As I said before, she, and not I, occupied the position of youngest in our household. She was spoiled, while I was left unpetted; she was flattered and admired, while no eye looked at, and no lip spoke of me; she was encouraged and almost compelled to lean on other people, while I was left to depend upon myself.

I came from school full of a happy plan of life. We had no mother, and our father was a mill-owner, and for many hours each day away from home. These periods, when Caroline and I should be left together, I meant to turn to good account. I was better educated than she was, and I meant to give her lessons. I cared for study, and I meant to make her learn with me where I was most ignorant. I came home primed with my project, and the first domestic tiding I received was the news that she was to be married within six weeks.

She gave me the information herself, as I stood taking off my bonnet in my room—gave it me with the prettiest blushes in the world, with the smallest, timidest voice—so softly and shyly, indeed, that at the first telling I neither heard nor comprehended what she said. But, for any sympathy that she got, or was likely to get from me, I understood quickly enough.

Had either of my elder sisters been at the moment of this declaration in my place, she would I do not doubt, have forthwith put her arms around Caroline's neck, and conveyed her congratulations to her with much affectionate kissing, and probably some few tears. I grieve to say that in no manner approached any such demonstration. I simply expanded my black eyes till Caroline's blue ones sank before them, and broke into one short sentence which I fear was neither affecting nor consolatory.

Her lover was in the house, however, at that moment, and I had to go down stairs and see him, as soon as I had smoothed my hair. I found him in the drawing-room with my father, and my father presented me to him.

"My daughter Anne" put out her hand, and it was enclosed straightway between a large palm and fingers—enclosed, but not grasped. I was small and cool; Mr. Hallam, on the contrary, large and nervous. What to do with my hand when he had got possession of it, or what to respond to the salutation that I made him, he seemed equally at a loss to know. He stood high above me, a tall handsome young man, looking into my face with a strangely-startled gaze, fluttering my hand up and down with a feeble irresolute touch.

"This is our youngest, our little school girl," said my father; "she is not much like Carry, is she?"

"No, certainly!" His eyes turned to Caroline's face with a quick, beaming, pleasant look; his fingers dropped from his hand, and I retreated to my father's side, taking to myself the consolation that if my own reception had been neither elegant nor cordial, my sister's future husband could at least in regarding her, wear a look of manliness.

As for me I thought it likely enough that he would take little further notice of me. In this, however, I found myself rather singularly mistaken. He dined with us that day, and during the whole time of dinner I was conscious of the continual movement of his eyes towards me. I became aware too, that each time he detected my gaze upon himself he became strangely disconcerted, to an extent that amazed me; he stammered and grew confused as to what he said; he even more than once abruptly broke off his sentence. I grew both surprised and perplexed, yet except for this singular nervousness, I liked him. I preferred him decidedly to either of my other brothers-in-law, and so I told Caroline before we slept, for my conscience smote me for the manner in which I had received the first announcement of her engagement, and some amende for that coolness appeared to me called for.

"Your husband will have more in him than either Jane's or Harriet's, Carry," I said, "though it is a pity he does not break himself of that nervous manner."

never saw any trace of such a thing in him before."

"Did you not? Then I suppose I must especially discompose him. I am sorry for that; because, if he begins with a strong dislike to me, he probably won't get over it."

"My dear he does not dislike you."

"How do you know?"

"He almost said so, Anne. He came to me after dinner, and said that it must be such a comfort to me to have some one with us now that I could lean upon, and when I looked as if I did not quite understand him, for indeed I did not, he said quickly, 'I mean Anne; can't you lean on her? don't you like her?'"

"And you said—what, Carry?"

"I said you were the youngest, and it seemed strange to talk of leaning on you."

I rose up from the fire over which we had been sitting, and laughed.

"Mr. Hallam has seen in one night what you have not guessed in all your life, Carry!"

It certainly did appear that Mr. Hallam was deeply impressed with the belief of my capabilities as a support, for we had not been acquainted for a couple of days before I perceived that he intended to use me not only to prop up Caroline, but himself. A looker on might have wondered how they had ever got on before I came, so constant now were the appeals to me, so eager the question "what Anne thought?" "what Anne advised?"—questions, however that they were rarely asked frankly or cheerfully, as though my opinion was cared for because I myself was liked, but always—strange as it seemed, it was certain so—as if in a kind of continued incomprehensible fear of me.

In many respects he was a strange man, and as time went on I was by no means heartily satisfied that he should marry my sister.—He was subject, I soon found, to fits of gloom and low spirits which had, even already, a most depressing effect upon her; the more that, fond of him as she was, she was too timid a creature ever at these times to be able to summon courage enough to attempt to rouse him. If she was timid, however, I was not; and when I could not persuade her to interfere with him, I at length took that work upon myself.

One day, when he was sitting moodily over the fire, I came into the room bonneted and cloaked.

"Frederick," I said, "get up and come out with me. Look how brightly the sun has broken over the snow."

He looked up, not upon the sunshine but on me. I had expected a direct refusal to my request; instead of that, with nervous haste he rose; in two minutes I had him in the open air, trampling the frosty ground beside me. There he paced, for two long hours, gloomy as night, yet obedient to every word I spoke. Where I went he followed me; what I bade him do, he did. I brought him home as the sun was setting, and I went up stairs and shut myself in my own room, with a strange chill feeling of dismay. What was that to this man should obey me?—doing my slightest bidding with this aspect of spiritless fear?

I shook my head. I said—"No." He gave a cry of joy. "God bless you, Anne!"

The warm tone pained me. I said, sadly enough.

"You have had little cause to bless me, Fred. But, if you are willing, let us be friends now."

I gave him my hand again, and it was clasped cordially. I believe that, in truth, he bore me no malice.

It wanted a fortnight to the day fixed for their marriage. During that fortnight Mr. Hallam was all that we could wish: there were no more fits of gloom. He was cheerful, sensible, affectionate, and my father and Caroline brightened daily. The marriage day came, and she was wedded to him. I bade farewell to them on a bright crisp February morning, and saw no more of them for nine months.

At the close of the nine months, I was suddenly made an orphan. My father had long suffered from disease of the heart; one evening, as we sat alone together, I heard a half cry from him, and saw his head drop on his breast. When I reached him he was dead.

I sent a telegraphic message to London to the Hallams, begging that Frederick might come down to me. Some time upon the following day I hoped to see him and trusting to him to spare me all the arrangements for the funeral, I shut myself up alone that day with my grief. But I waited for him in vain; the day passed and he did not come. I had to rouse myself then, and give directions for what had to be done. A second and a third, and a fourth day elapsed, and I was still alone. On the fifth morning, when I was indeed utterly alone, for the house was empty now, I at length received a letter from Caroline, with the postmark of a country place in Devonshire, whither they had gone, she told me, on her husband's account, for rest and change of air. She had neither received my message nor my letter, nor could I write to her now, for she gave me no address.

I waited patiently, in my lonely house for a long fortnight. One evening, when that time was expired, at last Frederick came. He came into the room where I was sitting—the blithe bridegroom, whom I had parted from nine months ago, changed into a wan, worn, haggard man.

I heard his entrance, and rose up. He uttered my name as I approached him, then seized the hands that I extended to him, and held them in a convulsive grasp.

"You have been alone?" were the only words that burst from his lips, "alone through this whole time."

"It could not be helped; I knew you would have come if you could have known."

"Alone!" he only repeated, shivering, "without a creature near you! How could you bear it? I could not live one day alone."

"Frederick, you have tired yourself with your journey. You are not strong. Caroline told me you had been unwell."

He raised his eyes, with a sharp suspicious look, to my face; but they staid lifted only for a moment. Suddenly changing into the old, incomprehensible expression of subjection, they dropped. He did not speak a word.

"Come to the fire; I will order supper for you. Come and take this seat. It is cold tonight."

He came and sat down; I seated myself beside him, and asked for news of Caroline.—He had nothing to say but that she was well. I tried to make him talk of other subjects but the effort was vain. His mind seemed entirely filled with that strange haunting horror of my loneliness; again and again, as we sat like one who had lost all self-control, he broke out into the same trembling exclamation, "Good God! how could you bear it?"

I sat at last quite silent, in deep wonder and distress. I thought it was well that I had been alone. I could ill have stood companionship such as this three weeks ago.—With a woman's instinctive love for manly courage and strength, I began to feel a strange pity and contempt for this weak nature—these unstrung nerves. I gave him food and wine, but they did not restore him to himself. He came back when he had eaten, and crouched again in silence over the fire.

It grew late; the clock over the chimney piece struck eleven. Then I spoke once more.

"You must be tired, Frederick. After your journey you had better go and rest."

He looked around with a lowly shiver.

"No, no; the house is so lonely," he said. "Let me stay here. Stay with me, Anne."

"We cannot stay here all night. You will be ready to come to-morrow."

"I am not going back with you, Frederick." "Anne!"

He looked me wildly in the face; then—

"Anne you must come!" he cried. "All our hope is in you. If you will not come to us, we are lost!"

He seized and grasped my hand; his manner was excited in the highest degree. I drew back and shook him from me.

"Mr. Hallam, what do you mean?" I demanded sharply. "Sit still and speak rationally."

He winced strangely, and shrunk back.—There was a few moments pause; then, in a voice entirely subdued, he asked me—

"Did I give you a letter? There was one from Caroline."

"No."

He searched in his breast pocket, and brought it forth.

"I beg your pardon; you ought to have had it before."

I took it to the light and read it. She had written mostly about her father's death; but at the end of the letter came these words:—"Frederick will ask you to return with him. Anne, do not refuse him! Oh, Anne, if you ever loved me, do not refuse to come!"

I folded up the letter, and went back to the fire where he was sitting. I laid my hand upon his shoulder. He looked eagerly round.

"Anne," he cried "you will come!"

"Yes, since you both wish it."

"Thank God!" he ejaculated; and the first look of composure I had seen came to his worn face.

"And now, that this is settled, Frederick, go to bed."

He rose up in silence; but the ghastly palor of cheek and lip, as he prepared to obey me, so shocked and startled me, that I abruptly checked his departure. Unmanly and pitiable as it was, there was no mistaking his intense fear of solitude; and in his weak and unstrung state I did not feel that I dared to force it on him.

"I am not going away yet," I said. "If you prefer to stay here, I will wheel this sofa forward, and you can lie down, before the fire."

He accepted my offer eagerly.

"I am not used to strange rooms; I am afraid I should not sleep," he muttered.

He lay down, and I threw a cloak over him. I sat down in sight of him and read. He was in reality weary and worn out; and before half an hour had elapsed he had fallen asleep. We sat out together next morning, and reached London by nightfall. My sister met us at her own door, and I looked again on the face I had not seen for nine months. It might have been nine years, it was so changed. I could have passed her in the street unconscious that she was kith or kin of mine.

I restrained my surprise and pain until we were together in my room. Then I stood up and faced her.

"Caroline, what does this mean?"

She had been trying to talk and smile. At my question all feigned composure gave away. She burst into tears and answered me. I might have guessed it. She was breaking her heart over the change in her husband.

"He is never unkind to me, but all day long he terrifies me," she sobbed. "I dare not leave him—he will never sit alone for ten minutes, from morning to night. He is so wretched himself that it half kills me to see him. Oh, Anne! what is the matter?—what is the matter with you?"

I tried during the day that followed to discover the answer to that question. Alas, when I thought at length that I had discovered it, it was no answer that I could tell his wife. Everything I saw forced upon me the conviction that the crushing weight upon Mr. Hallam's mind was some crushing remorse.—Day by day I tried to forget and thrust it back the more vehemently it forced itself upon me. I began to live under the pressure of a strange, chill horror.

We passed a fortnight miserably enough.—Mr. Hallam never left the house. Almost his entire time was spent in silence and inaction—staring over the fire. If he was roused or spoken to, a face of such infinite despair would rise before us, that many a time its expression wrung my heart. Sometime a momentary brightening in his look would cheer us for a few seconds; sometimes, and that, alas, more frequently, his dumb, listless misery would warm into a wild and feverish excitement.

We never left him, for his strongest terror was that of solitude. Day and night Caroline, or I sat with him. He had been fond of music, and even yet he seemed to take some thing like pleasure in it. Heavy as our hearts were, I therefore often played, and his nearest approaches to content seemed during the moments that he sat listening to me.

A fortnight had passed thus: at the end of it one evening this happened.

It was dark, but we had no candle; the fire was burning brightly, and I had gone to the piano, and sat there playing. Mr. Hallam had risen from his seat and was pacing the room. Caroline had come to my side.

I was playing softly, and suddenly from my sister's lips a cry rung through the room. Before I could speak, white with terror, and with outstretched arms, she started from her seat. I sprang up too. I could see nothing; the room was all as usual; but, while gasping over her husband's name, she staggered one step towards him, and then fell. Before she reached the ground I caught her in my arms, but she had fainted.

"Frederick, help me!" I called.

He was standing before an open drawer, looking wild and excited; but at my call he came.

"What is it?"

"She has fainted; raise her up."

He stooped and raised her. I bade him follow me, and went towards the door; but when I reached it he had not moved. Turning round I saw him still standing wildly gazing upon and passionately kissing his wife's white face.

I did not speak, and in two or three moments he came and joined me, and we left the room together. We went up stairs, and he laid Caroline on her bed. Then I rang the bell and summoned help. A servant came to me at once. I bade her to bring my mistress, and leaving her, I hurried back down stairs.

Mr. Hallam had gone a second or two before me. I found him again in the drawing room, when I noiselessly re-entered, before his escort, where he had stood when Caroline fainted. He was stooping towards the fire, examining the muzzle of a pistol by its light.

I stole up behind him and before he was conscious of my presence I had caught his arm with the strength of both of my hands. He turned round, wild eyed and furious.

"Let me alone!" he shouted "Devil!—let me alone!"

He tried to shake himself free. I do not know whence my strength came, but against his power, I kept my hold.

"Lay down that pistol!" I cried.

He kept it clutched fast.

"Lay down that pistol!" I cried.

Our eyes were full met, and staid so for a moment; then his dropped. I moved one hand from his arm, and laid it on the pistol; he let me take it. He stood before me, his wild fierceness gone, shaking and shivering like a child. I locked the weapon in the drawer; then I could stand no longer. I sank into a seat, and we neither of us spoke again.

Some moments passed—I do not know how many—and a hurried hand was laid upon the door. The servant I had left with Caroline entered.

"Miss King," she said nervously, "would you come up stairs? I don't know what is the matter with my mistress."

I made Mr. Hallam accompany me, and we returned to Caroline's room. She was still almost unconscious, but moaning in pain. In half an hour two physicians were at her bedside, and that night she was delivered of a dead child.

"But, Anne," she said, "it is strange. I