

'You know, Richard, I have always wanted an Empire parlor; and now I can have it.'

'What in the world do you want with an Empire parlor?' I demanded.

'Of course, I grant you that I may never need it but once; but I should like to know that it is all right for the last function that will occur in my honor.'

'I wouldn't talk in that way, my dear.'

'Well, no; Richard, you are right. I will not talk, but act. I am going to have an Empire parlor. I have it all planned. Heretofore I have not had it because of the expense, but now the insurance money will supply that. I shall have it all planned before to-morrow morning. I wish you would explain it to your uncle when he comes home, for he will object. Tell him I have made up my mind. He will understand that.'

Uncle Jacob did appear to understand it. He spoke of the carpenters and the noise that would disturb her, but it was no use, he said, to object, if Caroline had made up her mind. For the first time it seemed to me that Aunt Caroline was not right in her head, and I asked him about it.

'Your aunt is a strenuous woman, my boy. It would do no good to oppose her.'

One week later Margaret and I discussed the subject again.

'It's a remarkable thing how Aunt Caroline's house goes on just the same when she is sick as it does when she is well,' she said. 'But I dare say she directs the entire menage from her bed, or else the momentum is so well established that it would run away. The carpenters finished to-day, and she has been selecting the wall paper and carpet, the furniture, tapestry, curtains, and draperies. I declare it's positively ghastly to see the way she has her bed covered with samples, and she is as eagerly interested in everything connected with that Empire parlor as if she were in perfect health. It's the first time I ever heard of anyone's getting ready to give a funeral, especially one's own. What do you think of it, Richard, anyway?'

'Perhaps it's the ruling passion strong in death,' I made reply.

My Aunt Caroline's condition kept us on the quiver of excitement for days and weeks. When the Empire parlor was completed and the furniture arranged according to her direction, with every hanging and fold in place, she turned her attention to other things. She ordered samples of a thin cotton material resembling China silk, and from among a score of patterns she selected four, and ordered material for a pair of comfortable of each, with cotton wool to fill them. When they were completed and brought to her room, she summoned Mary Jane to her bedside.

'Now, my daughter,' she said, briskly, 'here are eight comfortable—one pair for each of the four beds. Do not mix them. The blue ones are for the guest chamber, and the olive for your father's bed. Be sure to keep the pairs together. If you take proper care of them you will have bedding enough to last three years. Then you must have another set made. Don't cry! These are things which we must look calmly in the face. You may have the pink ones for your own room, as they match your dressing-table and the wall paper. Give the younger girls the yellow ones. There, don't cry! The house will have to run, even if I am not here. Retain the hair-woman, and see to it that she takes the usual pains with Betsy's hair and with Amanda's. Never permit their hair to be done in curl rags. Cordelia's braids should be clipped some every month for the next year. Get a pencil and put down the quantity of sheeting I always buy, for you are sure to forget, and I am very particular about the brand. You may as well buy the sheets and pillow cases ready-made, but never get the hemstitched ones. They don't wear. To-morrow the dressmaker is coming to make up some dresses for you and the girls. I want to see that you are properly clad for the winter.'

Aunt Caroline got ready for her demise rather leisurely, although no one could say that more work could have been done even if it had been planned. When the girls' gowns were completed they were tried on and inspected, and then hung up in the closet. They were not black dresses. My aunt was too sensible for that. She had no wish to have her children gowned in somber black. Four new hats were also added to the collection of things to be worn after a while. Of course we were all very much stirred up by these active preparations for death. The children, at first shocked, then grieved and terrified, finally began to take a lively interest in the mother's plans, and the entire family developed a frame of mind that was ludicrously paradoxical.

But time slipped away, and Aunt Caroline still lingered, with apparently slight change in her condition. She maintained a melancholy attitude toward the present, and with tightly compressed lips watched the execution of her ideas for the future.

'I guess Aunt Caroline has thought of about everything, hasn't she?' I said to Margaret one evening, for

there seemed to be a temporary lull in the activity of preparation. 'I am glad the girls do not seem to take the matter so seriously as they might.'

'Every one is busy, and there is no time to mourn,' said Margaret. 'I thought everything had been attended to, but she called me over to-day to consult with me about her plans for the last offices, and she made me feel very sad in spite of the absurdity of it all. She has made up her mind that she is going to die, and I suppose Fate, as well as the rest of us, will have to give in to her executive force. She doesn't look much more like dying than I do, and I am sure she is not right in her head.'

'What did she want of you?'

'She gave me directions about her funeral, and if the thing were not so lugubrious it would be awfully funny. She wants a violet funeral! What do you think of that? The casket is to be violet color, and her gown is to be violet, and there are to be no flowers but violets.' Margaret shuddered. 'Don't bring me home any more violets for a while, please. I assure you, Richard, that I have gone very nearly to the end of my rope. Somebody will die around here soon. If Aunt Caroline doesn't, I believe I shall.' Margaret looked extremely serious for a moment, and then began to cry. Presently she was laughing again, so that I was alarmed.

'It's nothing, Richard. I have to laugh, I can't help it. And yet I must cry, too. Please let me cry.'

'Control yourself, my dear,' I said, 'and tell me the rest, if it is not too painful.'

'Painful!' exclaimed my wife, and she shook with suppressed laughter. 'Aunt Caroline has asked the children what they wish to give each other and to their father next Christmas. She has made out a list of gifts, and next on the programme is their purchase. She has even ordered tissue paper and violet ribbon with which to tie up the parcels. When they told me that, after she had been ordering a violet funeral, I nearly collapsed. It is ridiculous to permit her to wear everybody out as she is doing. She seems to have nothing but executive brain cells, and she certainly has an abnormal amount of them. She is not only crazy herself, but she will drive me to insanity before she gets through. I have begun to plan my affairs at night, even now.'

I regarded my wife with some concern as she made this disclosure, and forthwith decided that something must be done. I should certainly feel sorry to have Margaret become the strenuous woman that my Aunt Caroline had always been. Business shaped itself so that I was compelled to take a trip abroad, and I made my plans to take my wife along with me. Her health demanded that she should have a rest, and I went home one night with the information.

'We will go to New York to-morrow, so that we will be ready to sail on Saturday,' I said. 'Get yourself ready at once.'

'Aunt Caroline says she wants to be cremated,' said Margaret, betraying the fact that the all-absorbing family topic was still uppermost in her mind. 'Do you think we had better go until after—that is—while Aunt Caroline lives?'

'We will sail Saturday, life or death,' I said, with emphasis.

'Doesn't it interest you, Richard, to know that your aunt has abandoned the idea of being buried in the cemetery, even after buying the lot and composing her epitaph?' My wife spoke seriously and with tears in her eyes. The situation was certainly telling upon her nerves. Margaret no longer mentioned the subject with levity.

'Yes, I know, my dear, it is all very painful and exhausting, but let us drop the subject now and talk about the trip.'

The next day we made our farewells. Aunt Caroline took considerable interest in our intended departure, and we left her with the feeling that we had looked upon her face for the last time. It was a sad beginning of a trip that should have been one of only pleasurable anticipation.

We had been in London less than a fortnight when we received a cablegram from home, and as I tore it open Margaret sat down on the nearest chair and held her hand to her heart as though to fortify herself against the worst news that it could contain. I read it. Then I read it again. And then again. Then I read it aloud:

'Sail Germanic with Caroline Wednesday.'

It was signed by Uncle Jacob.

'Do you suppose Aunt Caroline decided to be buried over here?' I inquired at last.

'I cannot think that,' said Margaret. 'There is a limit to everything. You know she had the drawing-room in Empire style. She doted on that drawing-room. I don't mind telling you now, although Aunt Caroline told me in the strictest confidence, that she designated the exact place in the parlor where the—the—box, you know, Richard—was to stand the day of the—the—funeral.'