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A LOVE RETAINED

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By Maurice Walsh

She took up the eye-specialist's reply, and her fingers trembled as she opened it.

"From the notes received by me from your doctor, I am of the opinion that your husband's eyesight may be restored in some measure, if not totally, but, until I have examined him myself, I cannot be more explicit ....."

The letter fell from her fingers on to the table, but she clutched it back with a vague feeling that with that scrap of paper would go all that it represented --- freedom from care and, with light, a new life for the man she loved best on earth. The answer had come at last! The narrow chink of hope had widened into a beautiful probability.

A voice called from the other room. She rose and slipped the letter into her apron pocket, for she felt an impulse to dally with her happiness --- and with his.

He was in the one-time studio, in yesteryear filled with pupils but now bare and dismantled; yet he clung to it for all its old associations. He was sitting by the window and, with brush upraised, was painting the air with long, sweeping strokes.

"Well, Mary". He turned at the sound of her step.

They had been young when they had married fifteen years ago; he was twenty-five and she twenty. He was young still; his oval face, the glow of gold in hair and beard gave a brightness to his features which even the vacancy of the blue eyes could not counteract.

She had been handsome, too, but the anxiety born of her husband's affliction, which had come with startling suddenness, had induced an illness the effects of which were still visible and were unlikely to pass away after her three years of tribulation. She was only thirty-five, but her face was haggard and her thin yellow hair was coarsened with grey.

"Still painting?" She laid her hand on his curling hair and kissed him. She was feeling in anticipation the joy that was to follow.

"You are always painting nowadays." She could afford to be playful now on the subject. Only a few months, perhaps, and he would be painting in reality.

"Always, my dear." He put the brush down with a smile. "Do you know that when I have it in my hand it sometimes gives a clairvoyant sense of sight. I can see this room so plainly now. The curtains blown sideways, that bust of Psyche, the easels -- no, they have gone with the pupils. It is very empty, this studio. I can see the emptiness, although it did not change until afterwards. But there is no change about you, dear. I can see you now --"

"Can you, dear?" She spoke dreamily. She was used to being "seen" and, besides, there was the letter in her pocket that she was thinking of.

"Yes, I can see you now". The blank eyes looked at her with such an inner keenness that she shivered and for a moment she could not tell why.

He leaned forward. "Your hair so soft and yellow" and he touched the greying locks tenderly. "I never let you do it in the tangled frizz, like other girls. You used to lament about it, you'll remember. You said it looked so untidy when the wind blew. And the sun shone across it with that dazzling yellow gleam like gold. Dear, pretty hair".

The woman shrank away from the caress, and there was a sudden fear in her heart. His very finger-tips seemed to have eyes in them.

And he went on. "And your eyes -- blue like mine, but softer, like a child's, you know. I see them now, Mary<sup>V</sup>. Involuntarily her dimmed eyes closed. "And your cheek which seems a little thinner, now. But there is still that pure curve from brow to chin. How I love that curl! See, here it is".

He drew it in the air, and she put her hands to her haggard face; her mind was in a whirl. Then a thought came uppermost.

"You love me, Arthur, you love me -- for my beauty?"

"Now, my dear, don't be like the ordinary woman and pretend to misunderstand. I do love you for your beauty like Robert Burns loved his Mary, she of Argyll. Do you remember his words? 'I love thee for thy beauty, but not for that alone'?. I cannot separate the two. You're beauty is you; you are your beauty. It is an artist's love. Have you ever heard of an artist marrying a

plain woman? The poet and the musician may, but an artist never! Other men see with their eyes; we see with our souls. Others see the whole dimly, not knowing what they see; we see the different parts individually, the curve and the shadow and the whole as well. Blind as I am, Mary, your beauty delights me as much as it did in those other happy days before this affliction came upon me. I can see you still, Mary; thank God I can see you still".

"You see me still!" The words came softly as if without her consent.

"If I were old and haggard with greying hair, what then?"

"It would not be you," he answered simply, "but you will never grow old, Mary. Yours is a beauty that never fades; it only matures -- a steadier light in the eyes, a deeper shade in the hair, that is all. Mary,"-- his voice changed to a note of appeal -- "in spite of this inner sight of mine, I long to see you with the outer vision, to see the world again, to go back to my work with the pupils again. But, more than anything else, to see my beautiful wife again. I suppose" -- he spoke anxiously again -- "it is too early to expect the specialist's reply yet?"

"Not too early, Arthur; the answer has come".

"And what is it, dearest, the best or the worst news?"

There was silence for a minute and then, as she crumpled the letter in her pocket, she placed her hand on his shoulder.

"He says there is no hope, Arthur. You will never see me again".