What She Said
and
What She Meant

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Her name was Mrs. Marks and she sat at the time of which I write in her neat little sewing room. Everything pertaining to Mrs. Marks was neat. She was sewing. This, too, was characteristic of her quiet moments. She could never be accused of eating “the bread of idleness.”

She had company—an intimate friend, Mrs. Silas Eastman by name. This lady was a near neighbor and often ran in to have little social chats with her friend.

You would like to form your opinion of their character, by listening to their conversation? This, in a degree, you shall do. I will pass over the weather; suffice it to say that they discussed it in all its present dryness and prospective dampness and disposed of it, turning promptly to that other most fascination topic among married women, viz: hired help.

“Have you a good girl, now, Mrs. Marks?”
That lady paused long enough in her sewing to raise her eyes, and her eyebrows slightly, as she answered:

“What a question, Mrs. Eastman! Is there any such thing known in these degenerate days?

“Well, they are scarce, I admit; but now and then you do find one who really seems to be a treasure. I just came from Mrs. Streeters, and she tells me her girl is almost perfect.”

“How long has she had her?”

Mrs. Marks detests gossip
The tone is exceedingly significant. Mrs. Eastman feels it.

“Well, only a few weeks to be sure. But, then, if a girl can do well for two or three weeks, why can’t she for a longer time?”

“Ah! That is the question; why can’t she? I have often had occasion to ask that and have never yet been able to answer.”

Mrs. Eastman gives a sympathetic little sigh. She is conscious of a desire to have the girl in question hold out well, though she admits a. dawning sense of the improbability of it.

“Well, I’m sure I hope this girl will prove one of the rare exceptions. Mrs. Streeter needs good help, if anyone does, with her family of little children.”

“Who is the girl, Mrs. Eastman?”

“She belongs to a family who have lately moved here. They live down on Water Street, and are quite poor. Andrews, the name is.”

“Oh!”

Did you ever hear that sort of “Oh!” pronounced? If not, how is it possible to make you understand how it sounded in Mrs. Eastman’s ears? A whole volume of unwritten history was wrapped up in it about the luckless family who were so unfortunate as to bear the name of “Andrews.” The history of the grandfather of the Andrews, and the grandmother of the Andrews on the father’s side, and a dim suspicion as to the probable history of the great-grandfather of the Andrews, were all comprehended in that awful “Oh!” It induced from Mrs. Eastman the exclamation:
“Why, Mrs. Marks! you know the family don’t you? Aren’t they respectable people?”

“Oh, dear me! I hope so, I am sure.”

Did you ever hear a person say “I’m sure I hope it’s all right—” then did you observe a peculiar shake of the head? If so, you know just the sort of intonation and manner that made Mrs. Marks’s sentence so effective.

“Dear, dear! But if there is anything really wrong you know, poor Mrs. Streeter ought to be told of it. She is so dependent, kept at home with those little children of hers. All she knows about people is what her friends tell her.”

“My dear Mrs. Eastman! Haven’t you lived long enough in this world to realize that the most unthankful thing you can do for people is to interfere in any way with their ‘help’? I make it a point of honor never to do it.”

“But, then, if the girl is really bad you know—”

“I don’t dare say she is. I shouldn’t want her in my family, to be sure, under the circumstances. But tastes differ. Oh, I have nothing to say against any of them, nor to do with them, for that matter; let well enough alone, I say. If the family are really suffering, the authorities ought to be informed, though why virtuous people should have any occasion to suffer through poverty, in a world so full of work as ours, is more than I can comprehend.”
What had Mrs. Marks said against the Andrews family? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Were they dishonest? Who knew? She had not breathed such a hint; and you heard her distinctly declare that she *hoped* they were respectable. Yet Mrs. Eastman, as she thoughtfully evolved the matter, wondered what it *could* be, and resolved to lose no time in warning her particular friend, Mrs. Streeter, against her new girl. At the same time it seemed useless to try to pursue the subject further—Mrs. Marks was *so* averse to
anything that looked like gossip. She reluctantly dropped it and took up another.

“Did you know that Mrs. Decker’s husband is very sick? I hadn’t heard of it until I called there yesterday, and I found the bell muffled, and the girl came tip-toeing around the house to ask me to go out at the side gate because the other made a noise. I was very much shocked! The last time I saw him he seemed to be in perfect health.”

“I hadn’t heard of it,” said Mrs. Marks sewing away, calmly, “but I am not in the least surprised. In fact, if I ever expected to hear of anyone’s sickness, I may say I expected his.”

“Why, pray?”

“Oh, dear me! Don’t ask me, I never like to descend to particulars about people; it savors too much of gossip, especially when they are people who don’t concern me. The man just astonished me, that is all. What doctor do they employ?”

“Dr. Nellis, and I guess he must have spent the night there. Mr. Eastman walked up with him about eleven o’clock, and this morning when he went down to the four o’clock train he said he saw him coming out of there.”

“Is it possible that they employ Dr. Nellis! Well, I am astonished! I should think they would be the last people who would want Dr. Nellis in their house under the circumstances.”

“My dear Mrs. Marks! why not? Isn’t he accounted one of the most skillful physicians in town?”
“I dare say he is by those who happen to like him. For that matter there is nothing easier than to build up a name in the medical profession. A little judicious flattery, frequently bestowed, takes the place of wisdom wonderfully well in the minds of some people and atones even for awful mistakes. Dr. Nellis is really adept at flattery I have heard. But I am not of the sort to be
influenced in that way. I employ a physician on account of his skill; I don’t care whether he is handsome or homely, and he may be as rude as a bear if he will only attend to his business, *always provided that he understands his business in the first place.*”

“Mrs. Marks, you surprise me beyond anything! I always supposed that Dr. Nellis stood at the head of his profession.”

“So he may, for all I know to the contrary. He is not *my* physician. I am not a believer in young doctors anyway; they are much more likely to make mistakes than men who have had long experience, and an error in their profession is so often fatal. I’m sure I don’t see how Mr. Decker can endure the sight of that man; but the poor man may be so sick that he doesn’t know who attends him.”

“My dear Mrs. Marks, I wish you felt at liberty to tell me just what *is* the trouble about Dr. Nellis. I am *so* surprised! I should consider it confidential of course.”

“I don’t say there is any trouble with the man. I wouldn’t say it for the world. The Deckers have had an experience that would set some people against him for life, but if *they* can trust him again I am sure anybody may. Oh, I have nothing against him nothing at all. I hope Mr. Decker will recover. It would be a heavy blow to them if he followed his son so soon.”

“Did they lose a son? Why, how long ago? It must have been before they moved here.”

“It was when they lived in Portville.”

“Portville! Isn’t that the place where Dr. Nellis came from?”
“The very place.”

“And he was their doctor when they lived there?”

This time Mrs. Marks bowed her head, with her lips drawn in that peculiar pucker which indicates what volumes could be told if she should only happen to let them out of their pucker! But the determined eyes said, she would never do it—never.

Mrs. Eastman sighed again over her difficulties in acquiring knowledge.

“Well,” she said, “I really must go. I act as though I had nothing in the world to do this afternoon but talk with you, and I started out on a soliciting tour. I want to get half through my street if I can.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Marks, “that reminds me; I wanted to warn you not to go to the Petersons with your subscription paper.”

“Why not, pray? I was depending on them for a good lift; why shouldn’t I go there?”

“Because they won’t give, and it will only embarrass them to have to decline and add to the talk.”

“But why in the world should they decline? You know they are abundantly able to give. I suppose they are really the wealthiest family there is in our church.”

“That has nothing to do with it. You will find they won’t help a cent toward any scheme which Mr. Beldon favors so strongly.”

“Why, Mrs. Marks! their own pastor! Are they offended with him?”
Mrs. Marks sewed away at her flannel for a moment, then raised her eyes with an impressive look and a sigh and said, “I suppose they are.”

“But what is it all about? and when did it happen? I thought they were the most intimate friends.”

“So they were; but it is something that he has said which has offended them. Of all inconsiderate people with their tongues I do think ministers are the worst. One would think they might have the wisdom to be quiet.”

“And you don’t know what it is that has offended them?”

“Oh, I have my suspicions; but then I am not one, you know, to talk about such things. I must say I don’t wonder at the way they feel. Businessmen, you know, have to be very careful of their reputation, else there is serious trouble. I don’t suppose he meant to make any serious charge, but, to say the least, it was very thoughtless. There! Don’t ask me any more about it; I’m sure I hate such things and I don’t want to have anything to do with them.”

“Did I ever hear the like in all my life!” exclaimed Mrs. Eastman with uplifted hands. “Why, I quite depended on the Petersons to give me a large donation. So you think there is no use in my going there?”

“Oh, none in the world. It might be very unpleasant to you since you are not specially acquainted with them, and, besides, the sooner such things are hushed up the better—that is, if they can be hushed up. The Petersons are a very influential family, and they
are proud people, especially in a question that concerns their good name. Besides, a church quarrel is really the most difficult thing to handle in the world, and when the minister gets mixed in with it the case is almost hopeless.”

“Yes, indeed! that is true,” murmured Mrs. Eastman, she honestly supposed herself to be pretty sure of what there was to handle.

“Oh, one moment,” she said, as she was about to pass down the walk leading to the gate. “Will you be so kind as to give me the address of the young woman who used to sew for you? Phillips, I think, the name is.”

“Hattie Phillips; she lives on Third Street, corner of Broad, but don’t employ her, if that is what you are after.”

“Don’t? Why, I thought she was quite superior.”

“She is a good enough sewer, but there are other things besides sewing, you know, to be desired in a dressmaker, especially if you have to trust her entirely. I don’t want to injure the woman, of course, though as a friend I advise you not to employ her. No, I won’t even say that; you can act your own judgment about it. She may do well for you; I will only say that I have had enough of her.”

“Dear me! Some of those poor sewing girls are tempted to be dishonest sometimes. I hope she is not one of them.”

“Oh! well, we’ll hope so, if that will do her any good; though, as you say, there are great temptations in her work. But I am not
prepared to say anything about her in that way or any other except that I shall look elsewhere for my help.”

And then Mrs. Eastman did, finally, bid this good woman farewell, and went down the street intent, not so much on the errand which had called her out, as toiling under the weight of new and strange impressions that she had received.

As for the good woman—she went back to her pretty sewing room and sewed the warm flannel sleeve firmly and nearly into the nightgown of Mrs. O’Flannigan’s sick child, for she was a woman who often “spread out her hands to the poor.”
Chapter 2.
Seed Taking Root.

Now I want you to follow Mrs. Eastman and her “impressions.” She stopped with them at Mrs. Willard’s, and as in her transit she had passed the Peterson mansion, naturally she was thinking of them. As soon, then, as she had dispatched her errand she began:

“Why, Mrs. Willard, did you know the Petersons were offended with Mr. Beldon?”

“Offended! No, indeed; I supposed they were very intimate friends.”

“Well, it seems there is trouble. I didn’t know of it until today, and Mrs. Marks was very guarded in what she said; you know she is dreadfully afraid of gossip. But she gave me to understand that it was something pretty serious. Mr. Beldon, it seems, has been talking about Mr. Peterson. I should think, from what she hinted, that he had actually accused him of dishonest dealings in his business, or something of that sort. She says they feel dreadfully—
won’t have anything to do with the Beldons. She doesn’t blame them, either, for it has made serious times in his business—the charges have, you know; and—well the fact is, there is trouble.”

“Oh, dear! to have one’s minister gossiped about makes the wretchedest kind of work! It is sure to get into the church, and people take sides, and there is no end to the snarl. Really, I think a minister might as well give up, first as last, when it comes to such a state of things. His usefulness is pretty sure to be destroyed. That accounts for the strange way in which the Petathers have been acting. I wondered what took them to the city the very day of our church sociable; and they were not at the parsonage the other evening when the society met there. Now you speak of it, they are not regular at church anymore. I hadn’t thought of it before, but don’t you know, there have been several Sundays when nobody but Grace and her little brother were in their pew. Dear! dear! What wretched business!”

“The worst of it is,” explained Mrs. Eastman, “that Mr. Beldon has talked about it to others a good deal; and his wife, too, I suppose: She is a good deal of a talker, and, besides, she is a very excitable woman, you know I shouldn’t wonder if she had said the most—women always are indiscreet; but shouldn’t you have thought a man in Mr. Beldon’s position would have had sense enough to keep such a thing quiet? The Petathers are the most wealthy family in the church, you know, and by far the most influential. I daresay it was about his salary—some discrepancy, or
something of that kind; but why in the world didn’t the man let it go! What is the use of thinking so much about money anyway!”

“It will make trouble, depend upon it,” said Mrs. Willard, very impressively.

There is a way of speaking that word which will indicate that trouble of any sort is a very interesting and exciting thing.

I may as well tell you at once that Mrs. Willard, without possessing a bad heart or having the least desire to do actual harm to anyone, was of that class—that are still in existence—who delight in knowing all about other people’s affairs and in managing their very interesting troubles for them; or, if they may not do that, who take revenge in talking about them and their troubles, everywhere, on all possible occasions. Such being the case, it is a pity that Mrs. Eastman had not taken her occasions elsewhere.

Have you observed that while that lady supposed herself to be giving information which had emanated from Mrs. Marks, in reality she did not quote a single sentence of that lady’s? She simply quoted her impression of what was said, which is nearly always a different thing from quoting what is said.

I declare to you that there was not a better meaning woman in all the length and breadth of that town than Mrs. Silas Eastman. She had not the slightest intention of making trouble that bright afternoon, out on her charitable errand. She had not the remotest idea when she reached home, weary with her commendable
efforts, that she had made trouble. Bearing those thoughts in mind, follow her.

She proved herself not to be a real newsmonger, for she said nothing about the dressmaker, or Mrs. Streeter’s hired girl, or Mr. Decker’s illness, while at Mrs. Willard’s. None of these topics were suggested to her by circumstances. But an hour afterward she
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found herself at the Misses Walker’s door. Miss Mary Walker had just returned from Mr. Decker’s.

“He isn’t any better,” she said, in answer to inquiries, “and I don’t believe they have much hope of him.”

“What was the cause of his sickness?” asked Mrs. Eastman, suddenly. “Is he an intemperate man?”

“Why, not that I ever heard! What makes you think so?”

Be it observed that Mrs. Eastman had not said she thought so; it must have been her tone that was answered, not her words.

“Why, Mrs. Marks hinted something of the sort; at least, she said it was no wonder that he had brought himself down. She was not surprised; one who had been going on as he had must surely have expected it would end in some such way.”

“I want to know! Why, it must be so, for Mrs. Marks is well acquainted with them. I wonder we have never heard a lisp of it before; but, of course, people keep such things quiet as long as they can. What a shame! He was always such a pleasant man. I’m afraid he is going to die, too.

“I almost know that Dr. Nellis has no hope of him,” said Miss Mary. “I met him coming out of there, and he looked very sad and discouraged. He is such a sympathetic man.”

“And that reminds me of another thing,” exclaimed Mrs. Eastman. “Mrs. Marks says it is the strangest thing that they should employ Dr. Nellis. He made some horrid blunder in the
family when the son died; gave him an overdose, I suppose, or the wrong medicine; something of the kind, anyway.”

“I want to know! Wasn’t that dreadful? Certainly you would think they had had enough of him!”

“That is what Mrs. Marks says. She didn’t tell me it was an overdose, you know; she just spoke of the dreadful accident of which he was the cause; but it must have been something of that kind.”

Did Mrs. Marks speak of a dreadful accident? or was it lifted eyebrows and exclamation points that spoke for her?

The subject glanced off from sickness and physicians, and, by a line of transition known to ladies, reached that of dress.

“I don’t know who I am to depend on for my spring sewing,” Mrs. Eastman said. “I thought of having Hattie Phillips, but Mrs. Marks warned me against her. I am really disappointed, too, for I took a fancy to the girl.”

“I thought Mrs. Marks liked her very much.”

“She used to, for she told me so herself; but this is something recent. To tell the truth, I think the girl has been stealing from Mrs. Marks. Indeed, from what she said, I am almost sure of it; only I wouldn’t like to have it mentioned, you know. Poor thing! She may have been awfully tempted; they say she has a hard struggle to get along.”

“Dear! dear! Why, she is a member of our church!”
“Too bad, isn’t it? I meant to give her all my work, and I recommended her to several other ladies who were going to have her. I suppose I shall have to take back my recommendation now. I declare I feel bad enough about it to cry.”

A Victim
With this sympathetic sentence she disposed of the dressmaker and her affairs, then settled several other matters of life and death and secured her subscription. Then the nice little lady took a kindly leave and proceeded on her charitable way.

In the course of the next fifteen minutes Miss Mary Walker had occasion to go across the street to a neighbor’s house on an errand. It being the season for much dressmaking and sewing of all sorts, the subject came up while she was there, and of course suggested the recent item of news in the line; the immediate result being that the mistress of that house informed her husband at the tea table that he need not look up that Phillips girl for her; she had heard things about her that made her decide to find someone else.

Many more calls did Mrs. Eastman make; her subscription list swelled, so did her stories; not that she had an idea she was telling any; but it was queer how in nearly every place that she called, some of the subjects about which she had that afternoon acquired knowledge came up for discussion. And yet I do not know that it was strange. She was out raising money for the minister; of course it was natural to speak about him, and speaking of him suggested his trouble with the Petersons. Then, of course, everyone was interested in poor Mr. Decker and his family. It was not until the next morning that the thoughtful little woman found time to run over and warn dear Mrs. Streeter about “that Andrews girl.”

“But what is the matter with her?” persisted Mrs. Streeter, asking the question for the third time. A woman with three
children to care for doesn’t want to give up a “perfect treasure of a
girl” on the “they say” of people in general, especially when
“they” refuse to say anything definite. I will not say that Mrs.
Streeter would not have been able to throw aside her pastor, her
family physician, even her dressmaker; but a girl who cooked
well, and served tables well, and was quiet and respectful—that
required serious consideration.

“But she really isn’t respectable; that is—well, I don’t know
Mrs. Marks wouldn’t speak plainly; you know she is a thoughtful
woman and never wants to injure people; but if you could have
seen the way she looked when I told her you had an Andrews girl,
Dear Mrs. Streeter, do get rid of her; I’m sure I shall not sleep
nights for thinking of her with your children.”

“If I only knew what there was against her,” Mrs. Streeter said
thoughtfully. The mother in her stirred. “Suppose I ask Mrs. Marks
just what she does know about her?”

“Oh, don’t; she will think I ran to you telling tales. She wanted
me not to interfere; but I thought, since we were such old friends,
it was nothing more than right.”

Does it need telling, the fact that Mrs. Streeter dismissed her
without any special recommendation, either? At least when the
poor girl, a stranger in the town, referred those who questioned her
to Mrs. Streeter as the woman with whom she had lived for three
pleasant weeks, that woman, when inquired of, said she liked the
girl very much indeed; never had anyone who had worked better
and been so neat and so respectful; but, the fact was, she had heard some unfortunate things about her—nothing very definite, to be sure, but enough to make her feel certain that she had better get rid of her as soon as possible. And Mrs. Streeter, by reason of the little that she had to tell, unconsciously pieced it out with wisely ominous looks and expressive silences. And it worked mischief for the girl.

I am not disposed to speak slightingly of my sex; I am not disposed to admit that they are, as a class, hopelessly given over to gossip. I have all due respect to the remembrance that I am a woman. Yet, perhaps, one who has studied human nature very much is obliged to own that women interest themselves in the affairs of other women, and of other women’s children—yes, and of other women’s husbands—as men do not.

It is not necessarily a humiliating confession, either; it has its rise in an intense sympathy with humanity—the neighborly, gracious friendliness which men have not the time nor the thought to bestow: It sinks into the mire of common gossip among those women who, letting go the motive and ignoring other studies, cultivate that trait for the sake of the curiosity which it feeds.

Half the difficulty with our women—especially our young women—is that they do not read; they are not posted as to what is going on today, either politically, morally, or socially. I do not speak of the army of honorable exceptions who are as interested in all the great questions of life and are as earnest and sacrificing and
as patient as any name honored among philanthropists. I do not even speak of that army of exceptions who, by reason of the necessity that is upon them, make life a daily round of incessant drudgery in order that they and their families may be fed and clothed.

It is rather of that class—not small—who, having leisure in a degree, and talents in a degree, and opportunities lying around them, yet belittle their lives and fritter away their brains over the dress question, or the amusement question, or the social, idle gossip which has for its motive, from beginning to end, merely the satisfaction of inordinate curiosity.

Yet, I have taken as the exponents of this way of living not even the extreme class, but a grade above them. The Mrs. Marks and the Mrs. Eastmans of the world, who are virtuous women, keepers at home, industrious, frugal, charitable, refined, intelligent—those of Mrs. Mark’s stamp—have fallen into the habit, insensibly; oftentimes, of speaking or exclaiming ill of everyone who chances to be brought up for conversation.

Such do not so much err in telling *more* than they know as they *appear* to keep back volumes which they *could* tell if they deemed it prudent, and generalize over what *may* be until they succeed in making you believe that it *is*.

What are the motives of such woman? What was Mrs. Marks’s motive? She was not aware that she had any. It began in a disposition to look on the dark side of other people’s doing, to see
a great deal where little was meant. In short, it began with that disposition, which in its earlier, less offensive stages, we pronounce farsightedness. It developed through the desire, natural to die human heart, to be the bearer of news—of good news, if possible—in the beginning of the attack; but, if persistently yielded to, then of news, whether good or bad. Gradually there proves to be more excitement gotten out of the bad than the good; and gradually (shall I say it?) we must have news anyway, even if we manufacture some.

I do not mean that Mrs. Marks had consciously descended to that plane; she even had, in a vague way; a fear of saying too much, and so left her sentences half complete, and retired into the exclamatory realm, or the realm of unutterable looks which meant volumes. This habit was growing on Mrs. Marks.

As to Mrs. Eastman, she has her counterpart in every town and city; she meant nobody any harm; she listened to talk and jumped at conclusions. She had a vivid imagination; she interpreted shoulder shrugs, and lifted eyebrows, and “ohs” and “indeeds” in a royal way. They so promptly took shape and form to her, that it seemed simply impossible that they should mean anything else than they meant to her, and a week afterward she was sure that the very language had been used. Such people are numerous, are the best natured, most sympathetic people in the world, and make worlds of trouble.
Chapter 3.
The Soil Well Watered.

I want you to attend the sewing society connected with the Second Church of this nameless town. All the people whom we have met were connected with that church. Not all of them were present. Mrs. Marks did not attend; she had sewing enough to do at home; she “looked well to the ways of her own household.” And, besides, she thought sewing societies were centers of gossip, and she despised gossip.

The ladies were gathered in little cliques and grades according to their tastes. There were those who were deeply interested in the lecture given on the previous evening, and whose criticisms would certainly have done credit to any of the other sex. There were those who were deep in the discussion of domestic matters—the best jars for fruit canning; what proportion of sugar should be used; whether, after all, canned fruit was so much better than the old-fashioned “pound for pound;” whether oysters were better
cooked with milk or without; whether jellies should be boiled long or short and strained in a flannel or a linen bag; whether bread should be kneaded an hour by the clock, or scarcely kneaded at all.

These and a hundred other kindred mysteries pertaining to the department which requires brains and skill and patience and long continuance in well-doing to return fair results, and even then you cannot hope to succeed unless you have that indescribable, untransmittable quality of brain or nerve which housekeepers characterize by the word *knack*.

There were those who discussed with relish and talent the scientific news of the day, who had real and strongly pronounced opinions of the Darwinian theory, and the Huxleyan theory, and all the rest of the monkey theories. Nay, there were those who compared notes with relish and with skill over that modern giant among the intellects, Joseph Cook.

There were those who kindly, sympathizingly, delicately, entirely within the realm of Christian courtesy, discussed the saying and doing of their friends and neighbors. But there were undeniably those who bent their heads and sank their voices into whispers and reveled in the slime of the talk which almost invariably begins with a sepulchral “Oh! *have* you heard what horrid things ‘they say’ about—” well, about *anyone* who may have chanced before the public in a sufficiently interesting form for that style of vultures to feed upon. As I desire you to join yourself to this latter class, please listen:
“Isn’t that the greatest story about the Beldons and the Petersons? I declare I think Mr. Beldon has acted abominably. I don’t want to hear him preach anymore. I should think the Petersons would want to move away.”

“Well, now, what is the truth of that? I have heard so many stories I really don’t know what to believe.”

“Dear me! I hardly know; I guess nobody understands it very well; only they know that Mr. Beldon accused Mr. Peterson of making false entries in the church account and pretending he had been paid his salary when he hadn’t. And they had an awful quarrel about it. Some say that if it hadn’t been for Mrs. Peterson they would have come to blows. Anyway, Mr. Beldon used horrid language. They say he was so angry that his face was as white as a corpse!”

“Oh, my! What a way for a minister to act.”

“I know it. Just think! And then they say he told Mr. Peterson that he wasn’t the only one who had discovered his villainy; that everybody knew he had forged a name once and was only let off by paying an immense sum of money.”

“Why, the idea! I never heard that before. Do you suppose it is true?”

“Oh, I dare say. Rich men have often been caught in just such things. But I don’t see what was the use in Mr. Beldon raking the whole matter up and making such a horrid fuss. It will just drive away the Petersons from the church, of course, and I think it is a
real shame; they always give such lovely lawn parties and festivals for the church, and they entertain company so delightfully; anyway. It will just be horrid if they move away.”

“I hope they will send off Mr. Beldon and get a new minister. One or the other of them will have to go; the same town won’t
hold both those families long. Why; they say Mrs. Beldon talked worse, if anything, than her husband. I heard that Grace Peterson was so frightened at the way that she went on that she almost had fits.”

“Why! The idea! Did you ever hear of such a thing! I should think she was a lovely minister’s wife!”

“I don’t believe a dozen words of the whole story.” Thus spoke Miss Nettie Golden, the youngest and quietest of the group. “People gossip so horribly nowadays that you can’t believe anything.”

“Oh, but this is true! Why, I know it to be a fact; I had it on authority that is not to be disputed. It is a horrid enough way for any decent people to act; but for a minister and his wife! I think it is a perfect disgrace to our church.”

This is only a taste of the remarkable dish of talk that was served up among those young ladies, members of Mr. Beldon’s congregation—some of them members of his Bible class. The stories grew with each repetition of them, as one and another not so well posted as the leaders asked for particulars. Mr. Beldon was “horridly angry,” and “used dreadful language,” “perfectly awful,” and “so did Mr. Peterson; but then he was not a minister; it was not so strange in him, and Mr. Beldon charged him with all sorts of wickedness and said that he had been cheated and slandered and insulted and that he would have revenge if it sent Mr. Peterson to state prison.”
And what would you give for the pastor’s influence among those young ladies, after an hour of talk like that?

Every one of them were young ladies. They had not the cares and dignities of housekeeping and wifehood and motherhood to occupy them. Their education had run to daubs of paint on canvas—third-rate daub, you understand—and everlasting third-rate thrumming on pianos, with a smattering of French thrown in to make up the hash. They were not developed in anyone direction, consequently they had given themselves over to dress and parties and beaux. In the intervals of rest from these absorptions what is their occupation but knitting and gossip? They talk on:

“I do feel so sorry for the Deckers. They say his illness, commenced with an attack of delirium tremens. Isn’t that perfectly awful! And he was always thought to be such a nice man!”

“And I heard that Dr. Nellis made the horridest mistakes in his treatment. It was almost like murder; and you know he did murder the son.”

“Why, Nellie Eastman!”

“Well, it is just about the same thing. He gave him a dose of the wrong medicine that poisoned him, and he died in two hours afterward—never spoke again. Mrs. Marks told my mother all about it. Oh, that horrid man! I wouldn’t have him to doctor a cat.”

“Very few people do have him. They say he has lost practice fearfully. Papa says he shouldn’t wonder if he would have to leave town.”
“Good for him; I think he ought to go. Oh, girls. I heard such a horrid story yesterday about that Andrews girl. They say she poisoned herself because she couldn’t get any work and people thought she wasn’t respectable. She almost died. They had two doctors there all night.”

“Oh, horrors! But she isn’t respectable, is she?”

“Well, no, I suppose not; everyone seems to think she isn’t, though nobody understands just why. I guess she has behaved well enough since they lived here. I suppose it was before they moved here. Such things follow one, you know. Milly, do you think this shade is prettier than the purple for the cross?”

“Rather; I think it more appropriate for a cross. Is the girl going to die?”

“Oh, dear! I don’t know I hope not; such things make one feel so awfully gloomy. I can’t get over them for days. Hand me the pink silk, Kate. Girls, there’s Dr. Nellis going by. How solemn he looks. I should think he would want to wait until after dark before he walked out.”

There was a sudden hushing of tongues and a moving to make room for a newcomer. Mrs. Frank Truman, rightly named if ever a woman was: frank, sunny, keen, sharp as a needle when occasion required, true as steel always and everywhere. She was power in the church and in the town and wherever her influence touched. She sat down on a low hassock right in the center of the group of tongues.
“May I come, girls? I overheard some of your talk, and I want to ask you about it. I have been away, you know, and I don’t understand about some of these things which seem to have developed since my absence. What makes you think that Dr. Nellis made a fatal mistake once in giving medicine?”
The girls gave little startled glances at each other and were silent. They were not accustomed to being asked straightforward questions. At last one ventured.

“Why, everyone says so, Mrs. Truman.”

“What ‘everyone’ says, my dear Milly, is too large to be investigated. What I want is a responsible name.”

“Well, Nellie Eastman says her mother was told so.”

“She was,” Nellie said. “Mrs. Marks told her all about it; she used to know them before they moved here.”

“Mrs. Marks! Very well; thank you, Nellie. That name should be responsible, certainly. Now let me ask you why you think that Mr. Decker’s illness commences with delirium tremens?”

“Why, it is the general talk, Mrs. Truman, all over town.”

“So I perceive. The question is, how came it to be? Who started it? Who knows it to be so?”

These questions the girls could not answer. None of them knew who said it first, though somebody must have started it, of course. But question and cross-question as she would, she could get no positive knowledge from anyone of the group, nor were they able to direct her to any positive source for knowledge. She dropped those two stories, and took up the one which concerned their pastor. Here it was even worse. “They” said it, and everybody believed it. This was the utmost that these girls knew. Even the one who had so earnestly affirmed that she knew it on authority that was not to be disputed remained silent until directly
interrogated, and then she admitted that she did not mean she absolutely knew it, but only that the one who told her seemed to be so sure of its truth and knew so much about it that she felt as though it must be true.
Here one of the group came to her rescue.

“Why, Mrs. Truman, everybody believes that. Look how the Petersons act. They stay in the city half the time, and they are not regular at church anymore than they are at home, and they don’t come to society at all.”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Truman, laying a cool, firm hand on the eager girl’s arm, “is all that proof of the solemn charges which you have been making against our pastor, or is it unjust and unjustifiable surmise?” And then, to the silenced group, she added:

“I am convinced that there has been a chain of lies formed somewhere. Who started them or what the object would have been, I am at a loss to know, but I mean to discover. I am going to depart from my usual custom and descend to be a bearer of news. I have known Dr. Nellis ever since he was a little boy. He has been intimate with the Deckers for fifteen years. He indeed the family physician at the time they lost their little son, but he was not even in the same city during the sudden and violent illness. He was telegraphed for, but arrived too late. However, there was not a sort of blame attached to the physician in attendance. He did everything that it was possible for human skill to accomplish. So you see, there is not even that foundation for the story: And now think what injustice has been done a skillful physician, a comparatively young one, too, who has his reputation, in part, to make!
“To further prove to you how utterly absurd the story of his mistakes in Mr. Decker’s treatment is and the falseness of the report that Mrs. Decker will not speak to him now, I have only to tell you that he is very soon to be married to her youngest sister, and she is to receive them into her family. As to the reports concerning Mr. Decker’s habits and the cause of his illness, I haven’t words to express my indignation. That decent people, who have lived in the same town with a good man for twenty years, watching his blameless life and his Christian liberality, should in such a cold-blooded way help to circulate a vile slander, originating none of them know how or where, is a disgraceful comment on human nature. But you will remember that I am an intimate friend of Mrs. Decker. I promise you I am not going to let her husband’s name go down to the grave thus insulted.

“As regards our pastor and his wife, I have nothing to say today, but you will hear more about that matter before long. If people will talk they must take the consequences. I heard what some of you were saying and thought perhaps you could help me in my efforts to reach the truth. But I see you cannot. You are swimming through that dreadful pool of slime ‘they say.’ Of all irresponsible persons, that ever-lastingly quoted ‘they’ is the most so. Never trust your characters to her, girls, or soil your tongues by repeating her gossip. I want you all to reflect a moment as to what possible proofs you could give concerning the statements that you have been making to each other. Suppose you were in a court of
justice, testifying under oath, what could you say? It is unworthy of you, girls.”

Saying which, she moved away, and the silence that she had made fall on them was broken at last by Nellie Eastman, who said:

“Isn’t she horrid?”

And then they fell to wondering who could have told such perfectly horrid stories about Dr. Nellis; and declared, each one of them, that they had never more than half believed it. And as for Mr. Decker, everybody knew that he was a good man. For their part, they thought it was perfectly awful to talk so about people. And they actually did not realize, poor surface dolls that they were, that their silly tongues had eagerly helped in the circulation of the “perfectly horrid stories.”
Chapter 4.
Fruitage.

In order that you may understand the source of Mrs. Frank Truman’s courage and the extent of her indignation, I shall have to ask you to go back to a morning preceding the society and make three calls with her. They were to the houses of trouble; yet trouble in more different forms could hardly be found. First she sought, on the decent street where she had left her, for a favorite sewing girl of hers, Hattie Phillips. She did not find her there; but patience and perseverance, and the mounting of two flights of rickety stairs, brought her at last to the dingy back room where Hattie sat and sewed on that which is know as “slop work.” But she hummed, and the words that she tenderly lingered over were these:

When the woes of life o’ertake me,
  Hopes deceive and fears annoy,
Never shall the cross forsake me;
  Lo! it glows with peace and joy.
Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is *there*, that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.

What were attics, or rickety stairs, or slop work to one who could sing that song with the spirit and with the understanding!

*Hattie Phillips*
“Why, Hattie!” Mrs. Truman said, “I had a great time finding you. What are you doing here? And making shop shirts, I declare, for a dime apiece, is it? What is the meaning of all this?”

Hattie’s kind, gray eyes looked from their clear depths into her questioner’s face, as she said:

“It means an honest living, Mrs. Truman; I am going to earn my bread to the best of my strength. There’s many a poor soul who can’t get this to do.”
“But I want to understand what it is all about.”

“Why, you see,” and there was actually a gleam of mischief in the gray eyes, “the shopmen know that I can’t very well steal a sleeve out of a shirt, so they trust me; and by that means I earn my bread and milk; for I will have milk, you know, even if I have to get it in a rusty pail and bring it up these creaking stairs.”

“Hattie!” said Mrs. Truman, almost in indignation, “how can you be so bright and funny over such an abominable state of things as this?”

“Dear Mrs. Truman, why not as well laugh as cry? though I won’t deny that I have had my turn at crying; but I knew it would all come out right. ‘Not a sparrow falls,’ you know, without our Father, and I knew that my good name was of more value to him than many sparrows. Besides, it really has its funny side; think of my stealing breadths of silk from Mrs. Marks and the others! What would I do with them?—why don’t they think of that?” and this strange girl actually laughed. “Not but that I am glad enough that you have come home,” she said, when her laugh was over. “And I haven’t been as mild over it as I might, some of the time; but it will end right, somehow. I do wonder really what it is intended to do for me; something, of course. What can it be? I suppose I have said a hundred times in the last two weeks: ‘All things work together for good.’ And I have wished that I could just have a minute’s peep behind the scenes and see this queer story in all its snarls and twists working together for my good! Wonderful that it
is so, isn’t it?” Then she broke down again and her gray eyes filled full of tears, and she dropped her head suddenly on the shoulder of the woman who had been a lifelong friend to her and murmured: “I felt sure you would come this morning. I begged of him to send you.”

From there Mrs. Truman went to her old friend, Mrs. Decker. What a house that was to visit! Crepe streaming from the doorknob, hush in the hall, servants tip-toeing in that strange, quiet way in which they instinctively move in the presence of death, as if they could disturb the dead! The front parlor dosed and darkened, mirrors shrouded, easy chairs wheeled back; order and solemnity and gloom pervading the very atmosphere. And one silent occupant; forever folded hands, forever pulseless breast. Reverently Mrs. Truman drew back the white covering and looked on that familiar face on which death had set its solemn seal. There was a step behind her, and the wife who had walked with him for twenty years came and stood beside him, looking with dry eyes and a drawn, almost fierce face at her blessed dead.

“The worst is,” she said, speaking in a dry, hard tone—“the very worst is, that they lie about him! They dare to say that he died because he was, in secret, a drunkard—my husband! Mrs. Truman, think of that!”

Mrs. Truman drew back her head, and with flashing, indignant eyes asked:

“Who says it?”
“Everyone. I hear the servants’ chatter, though they do not mean I shall. Isn’t it too hard to bear, Mrs. Truman?”

“Oh, no,” and Mrs. Truman’s voice was sweet and tender now. “Oh, no, dear Mrs. Decker, it isn’t. If it were true, it would seem almost too hard to bear; but when you and he know what he was, and what he is today, and the dear Lord knows and has called him
to come up higher—why, it can be borne, and in a sense, it is as nothing. But I promise you this, Mrs. Decker; it will be taken back. It had its starting point in some silly misstatement or misunderstanding of some sort, and that starting point shall be found. Meantime, it hasn’t hurt him, you know, and all his friends know it to be as false as it is foolish.”

Passing out of that house she almost ran against Dr. Nellis. He held out his hand to his old friend with a warm smile.

“We are passing through deep waters, Alice,” he said. She held his hand in a warm grasp of hearty sympathy.

“He was like your brother,” she said tenderly. “I know how it hurts.—Oh, yes, I have heard the absurd story.—I hope you don’t allow that to disturb you? I shall contradict it, of course, and yet it is hardly worthwhile; it is too silly to be believed. But I’m going to find out where all these strange ideas started from, just as a matter of personal curiosity, if for no other motive.”

She had another call to make; it was at the home of “that Andrews girl.” What a wan, worn, well-nigh lifeless face it was! And what a rush of strong fresh air, and life, and hope came into the desolate little room with the entrance of Mrs. Frank Truman!

“I’m ashamed of you,” she said heartily. “When you get well again and come to live with me, I shall scold you hard, you may be sure of that.”
Then the girl cried. She had been proof against reproaches, proof even against her mother’s frightened tenderness during the horrors of the night.

“I was so very; very wretched!” she murmured. “You don’t know, you can’t think what it is to be so deserted and not know what about; I didn’t know what to do.”

“Nonsense! There were a dozen things to do. Why didn’t you ask Mrs. Streeter in plain English what was the matter, and persist until you reached a starting point, then you would have discovered that it started in nothing. Why didn’t you write to me and tell me you had been discharged? Why didn’t you write to your old pastor and ask for a certificate of good character? Don’t you see how many things there were to do, instead of which you did the only dreadful thing of your life—tried to take it into your own hands and go to meet God before he called you.”

The girl hid her face in her hands and cried harder. The sore which she had nursed all winter was being probed, roughly, it would seem, but Mrs. Truman had the doctor’s word for it that an outburst of natural feeling would be the best thing for her.

“I lost my senses for a little while,” she said timidly. “Indeed, Mrs. Truman, I would never have done that, in had known what I was about; but I was wild.”

“I dare say; in fact I know it, my child. I don’t mean to scold you now. I shall save that, as I told you, until you get well, then you are to come and live with me; and I wish you would hurry, for
I am waiting for you. I must go now; and, Jennie, I want you to think of this: God has been very good to you in sparing your life and not letting you in your wildness rush into his presence uncalled. To show your gratitude you must do everything that you can to get well and strong and prove to the world by your future living that you are one of his own. And remember, after this, that one who belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ and is actually looking forward to a home with him for all eternity has no right to be utterly cast down or made desperate by anything.”
Then this woman bent and left on the pallid forehead a kiss as light and tender as the dropping of a rose leaf. And strength came with it into the very life-blood of the lonely disheartened girl.

“Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these,” said the Lord, “ye did it unto me.”

It was several days later when Mrs. Truman, who meantime had been very busy running to and fro, made her way into the sunny south parlor of the parsonage. A welcome visitor was she at that home. Do you need to be told that such a woman had strong, granite friendship for her pastor and his family?

Into the midst of the eager questionings and answerings that indicated vivid interest in whatever pertained to the lives of each, Mrs. Truman suddenly broke in with the question:

“By the way, what is the trouble with the Petertons?”

The clear light on her pastor’s face gloomed, and instant sadness and anxiety overspread it.

“If you can answer that question for us,” he said, quickly, “you will confer another lasting favor. We have no more idea than the wind what is the trouble; that there is trouble we see plainly enough, They have ceased coming to the parsonage; they declined our invitation only last week, and they have ceased inviting us to their home, which was always open to us, you know. If I should attempt to tell you what infinite pain this has caused us I could hardly succeed. Sometime I even felt that it would necessitate our
breaking loose from all these ties here and going out to a new home. The friendship between us has been so strong and the break is so mysterious that it cuts deeply.”

Mr. Beldon spoke with strong feeling, with a visible tremble of lip and a perceptible quiver of voice. As for his wife, she silently wiped away large tears as they slowly dropped on her hand. Mrs. Truman looked from one to the other with a puzzled air, in which vexation and amusement blended curiously.

“Do you mean to tell me,” she asked at last, “that you have let this thing fester and rankle until it is a raw sore, without ever going to the fountainhead and asking squarely what is the matter?”

The pastor wriggled in his chair and looked embarrassed.

“Well, yes,” he said, “that is about what we have done, perhaps. The fact is, I didn’t see my way clear to speaking with Mr. Peterson. You see there has been nothing pronounced—nothing open, I mean. The trouble is perceptible only to us. Mr. Peterson is too much a gentleman—and in fact the entire family is too well bred to treat us other than courteously in the presence of others. And it—well, the truth is, it seemed to me rather a delicate business to go to a man and say, “Look here, why don’t you invite us to your elegant home to enjoy your elegant hospitalities as heretofore? A man has a right to choose his guests, and to weary of them for that matter, I suppose.”

“What an idiotic world it is!” burst forth Mrs. Truman. “And you actually believe that this matter is between yourselves! Pray,
where do you suppose I heard of it? My dear pastor, it is all over town; and if you don’t know Mr. Peterson’s grievance, it is high time you did. I shall not spare your feelings in enlightening you. I have to inform you that you have had ‘a horrid quarrel’ with Mr. Peterson, or ‘a perfectly dreadful time’; or ‘a regular row,’ according to the degree of refinement possessed by the person who talks about it; that you were ‘fearfully angry,’ and called dreadful names, and all that sort of thing; that you accused Mr. Peterson of cheating you out of salary due you and hinted broadly that he had, in his earlier days, been a forger, and, oh, dear me! I don’t know what horrid things you didn’t say! There was a perfectly awful time!”

“And you helped, Mrs. Beldon; you come in for your full share, I can tell you. And Grace Peterson ‘fainted, she was so frightened.’ Some have it that way; and some that she tore your hair and bit your arm, or something of that sort. It all seems to depend on the dramatic power of the person who is your informant for the time being. But I’m sure, Mr. Beldon, after all this, you cannot blame the Petipersons for not inviting you to dinner.”

I will not attempt to describe to you the faces of Mr. and Mrs. Beldon during this rapid recital, that was purposely given a seriocomic air by the reciter. In truth, she could hardly refrain from laughing, partly owing to excitement and partly to the ludicrous changes of expression on her pastor’s face from bewilderment to dismay and indignation, and then to fogginess.
“Did you never hear the story that was told the little boy, with a promise that it should not end until he was weary of it?” she asked at last, after she had almost vainly tried to explain to them the growth of the marvelous gossip. “It was about a snowball which a boy made once upon a time, and it runs in this way: Then he rolled it over, and it grew bigger, and he rolled it over, and it grew bigger, and so on, and on, until tradition says the boy was actually
tired, though that I don’t believe. But that’s the way with this story. It has been rolled over, and over, and over, and grown bigger with every roll, until the original has disappeared in space and left: this monster. However, I have the satisfaction of being able to tell you just who rolled it next, and next, and next, and going backward it unwinds beautifully.”

“But the original!” said the minister impatiently. “Who could have started such a story, and what could have possibly been the motive? Why, I haven’t an enemy in the world, so far as I know.”

“Ah, yes, you have; and it is my duty to inform you that it is lurking in your home at this minute. Your own luckless tongue, Mr. Beldon, gave the first start to this magnificent ball!”
“Mrs. Truman, do you mean you suppose—”

“Mr. Beldon, I mean I know that your own words are the starting point. ‘Out of your own mouth will I condemn you.’ Listen. Didn’t you, once upon a time, in Mrs. Marks’s parlor, say that Mr. Peterson had a remarkable way of managing matters as related to the salary—a way peculiar to himself so far as you knew?”

“Why, I dare say I may have used just that language; but, my dear madam, Mrs. Marks and everyone in our congregation knows just what that meant. They have heard a dozen times over that when there has been an empty treasury on quarter-day, Mr. Peterson writes out his check and sends it to me, precisely as though the treasury was full. And, that when there has been a deficit of the year’s account, his hand has invariably gone into his pocket and made it straight. These things are no secrets.”
“I can’t help it; I am ready to prove to you in court, if you really want me to, that this is the original ball, and that the monster unravels down to it; that is, you have a piece of it. But didn’t you further say, on the same unfortunate evening, that Mr. Peterson possessed a dangerous talent in his ability to imitate even the most
peculiar handwriting, and that you had known men as high in position and apparently as strong in character as he, ruined in the moment of temptation by such a talent?”

“I—yes, I certainly did make that remark; I remember it. But, then, what of that? How was it possible to make anything of such a common statement?”

“Why, it rolled, I tell you, and rolled, and grew bigger and bigger, and was in a fair way never to end—what with your meekness and the world’s impishness. But you have the facts as sure as I am Mrs. Alice Truman, and I can give you the unwindings.”

At this point Mrs. Beldon made her first remark.

“What could have made Mrs. Marks so cruel! We have never offended or injured her, surely.”

Mrs. Truman turned to her quickly.

“My dear Mrs. Beldon, there never was a more amazed woman than this same Mrs. Marks. She hadn’t an idea that she started this ball. She repeated a word or two that your husband said, according to her abominable fashion, then she retired behind mystery and hints. ‘Mr. Beldon had known some very strange things to occur in his day. Mr. Peterson was only human. There were temptations in his line of business that were peculiar. He had full control of the salary, and it was managed in an unusual manner, Mr. Beldon said so himself.’ Can’t you hear the woman? The Petersons got hold of the ball, after it had rolled just a little further: It appeared to them
in the form of a grave hint of possible errors in management and a
fear of temptations too strong to be resisted. Naturally they didn’t
like it; but for fear of making trouble in the church, ‘injuring the
cause’ and all that sort of stuff, they simply kept still and grew hurt
and dignified over it instead of coming directly to you as they
ought. I hope I shall never be so overburdened with a fear of doing
injury to the cause that I shall take leave of my common sense.
But, then—Mr. Beldon, where are you going? I’m not half
through.”
“I’m going to Mr. Peterson’s office,” said Mr. Beldon, reaching for his hat and making long strides across the hall.

“Just where you ought to have gone two months ago,” called out Mrs. Truman after him, as the gate clicked in the lock.

“In fact,” said that same brisk lady, not long afterward, as she laughingly closed the account of some household matters to a special friend of hers, who, with her husband was taking tea with the Trumans, “I have my family reconstructed on a basis that is very pleasant. What with Hattie Phillips upstairs, ready to .sew on buttons and strings, and darn and hem and tuck, and pull all sorts of wrong things right; and Jennie Andrews in the kitchen to look after matters generally in a way that she understands, I am a woman of comparative leisure and unbounded satisfaction.”

“Was that Jennie Andrews who waited on table?”

“Yes. Isn’t she neat and skillful and pretty? She is a grand girl. I feel sometimes as though I ought to send poor Mrs. Streeter a note of thanks for discharging her.”

“Was there any foundation for that wretched story which they had about her?”

“Why, yes, there was foundation, if you can make the story stand on it. The poor child was engaged to marry a man who proved worthless, deserting her on the very night when the marriage was to have taken place; and a great deal of cross-questioning drew from Mrs.
Marks, with whom the story started, the fact that she feared he would be hanging around and give Mrs. Streeter trouble. That’s the foundation! Don’t you wonder the building reached such large proportions? I tell you, I feel enraged when I think: of the way that woman talks and looks and exclaims! Only think of the commotion she has raised in this town during the last few months! Why, the Peterson trouble would have ruined the church in a little while. If our minister hadn’t had the sense to go directly to Mr. Peterson and demand an explanation of the whole thing, it would have gone on seething and boiling until we should have had an explosion. As it is, there are those who will always believe that something was wrong, somehow, with somebody. Mrs. Marks didn’t mean it; she never means anything, and that feature of her case provokes me as much as any. It makes her so invulnerable. She doesn’t recognize her own stories. When they come to her afterward, she looks at them as a creation with which she had nothing to do; but she gives them a lift, just as she did this one. With a few such indefatigable helpers as Mrs. Eastman, such a woman can accomplish wonders, and be composed and charitable all the time. Why, Dr. Nellis says some people look at him yet as though he were a dangerous creature, and it was wonderful in Mrs. Decker to endure his presence, all because Mrs. Marks supposed him to be the attending physician when the Deckers lost their child and thought the associations connected with him ought to have been too painful for them to have had anything more to do with
him. That was all she meant, she told me so, and you know how it grew as it travelled.”

“But I think the saddest thing is that story about Mr. Decker. I never understood how that could have even been shadowed by a foundation.”

“Is it possible you have never heard? Why, that indefatigable Mrs. Marks exclaimed and ‘Oh’d’ over his sickness, ‘didn’t wonder at it,’ you know; and then strung half a dozen sentences about something else on to that, as though they belonged, and away it flew. What she meant was that she had taken dinner with him a few days before, and he had mixed acids and sweets in such an abominable manner that she had felt sure at the time that no human stomach could endure it! Wasn’t that a remarkable beginning for such a terrible conclusion! Why, there was never anybody who believed the atrocious story less than the woman who started it! When I confronted her with it she was utterly dumbfounded!”

“What troubles me is, how is anybody to be safe from such tongues? Why, it wouldn’t take more than a half hour to ruin the reputation of anyone of us, at that rate.”

“I tell you, the truth is disagreeable sometimes, but hints, and shrugs, and exclamation points, and lifted eyebrows, and ominous silences are infamous. I’d engage to make out a case of murder in the first degree with a few such aids. Mrs. Marks is perfectly adept in their use, and the woman talks in such a virtuous way about the
sin of ‘gossiping’ that it is enough to drive one distracted. Why, in that regular combat that I had with her, though I was as plainspoken as a mortal could be, I didn’t succeed in making her more than half believe that she herself was at fault. To be sure she had an idiotic world to back her, to repeat and increase all she said and interpret her signs to suit their silly selves, but she always will have those aids; and she will go right on making mischief and never discover that she is doing it, or recognize her own stories when they are brought to her.”

“The woman needs a dose of reconstructed golden rule to digest!” said Mr. Truman, as he folded his napkin. His wife paused in her talk long enough to bestow a puzzled look on him, and at last asked:

“Frank, what do you mean?”

“Why, if she had a taste of ‘whatsoever I say about others, even so will they say about me,’ it might teach her a wholesome lesson or two.”

“Oh, I comprehend. I wish with all my heart she could have such a lesson, if it were not too severe; for really the composed way in which she used up Hattie Phillips, because she made her dress too short-waisted, is simply dreadful; and then the most exasperating feature of it is that she actually takes credit to herself for not having told of it; when what she said or rather what she didn’t say, was infinitely worse.”
From this outburst started the talk that developed finally into a plan that was arranged with many bursts of laughter and resulted in the two couples issuing from the Truman mansion in the course of the evening ready to make a social call on Mrs. Marks. As they were intimately acquainted with that lady and occasionally spent an evening with her, their arrival awakened no surprise. The first lull that occurred after the general preliminaries to conversation had been attend to, Mr. Truman, with a peculiar little ‘ahem!’ that notified the rest of the company to watch for something special, asked if Mr. Marks was expected home soon, and added:

“That is a very disagreeable circumstance connected with his business, isn’t it? I was very sorry for him when I heard of it.”

Instant alarm overspread Mrs. Marks’s face as she eagerly questioned:

“What circumstance?—has anything happened?”

“Oh, nothing new; nothing but what you are well acquainted with, of course. I was only thinking how hard it was for businessmen to weather such troubles. But I hope he will get through all right.”

Then Mrs. Watson:

“Mrs. Marks, your daughter Flora has her share of trouble, doesn’t she? I really don’t see how she bears up under it so well. It is ridiculous to make light of such peculiar troubles. But some people have no feeling.”

Then Mr. Watson:
“Yes, indeed: I think she is to be pitied; and you, too, Mrs. Marks; a mother suffers so much under such circumstances. It is a wonder that you endure it and look as well as you do.”

Then Mrs. Truman:

“And, in view of the peculiar circumstances by which you are to be surrounded next week, that, of course, will add to your perplexities. I declare, you have my sympathies.”

Each of these sentences had followed each other in such rapid succession that Mrs. Marks, whose face had been growing more and more disturbed and finally frightened, now interrupted Mr. Truman, just as he was commencing with:

“For my part I think Mr. Marks has—” with the eager and anxious exclamation:

“What in the world do you all mean? For mercy’s sake, speak out plainly and. tell me what you are talking about! I haven’t the least idea what has happened. I am not in any affliction, nor are my circumstances peculiar, so far as I know. You must be insane, or else you know something about my affairs that I do not. Now, what do you mean?”

Her answer was peal on peal of laughter, so utterly uncontrollable and so heartily joined in by each one that it is hardly a wonder that Mrs. Marks’s face darkened, not only with perplexity, but with indignation.

“Really,” she said began, “this is extraordinary! What am I?”

Mr. Truman interrupted her:
“My dear madam, we ought to beg your pardon for frightening you. But, if you will reflect a moment, what have we said, after all, that should cause you any disturbance? There really has not been a single statement made as yet, and our talk may mean anything or nothing, may it not, just as you pleased to interpret it?”

“Is this a practical joke?” asked Mrs. Marks, with an effort to be composed, “or did you come here to insult me?”

Then Mrs. Truman interposed:

“Dear Mrs. Marks, we have no intention of insulting you. We beg your pardon for laughing, but it was funnier than we thought it was going to be. Don’t you remember, in the conversation that I had with you a few weeks ago, you declared that no statement which you had made, so far as you could see, was sufficient to have caused anyone trouble, or even anxiety; that you were at perfect liberty to refer to a circumstance, and yet not explain what you were thinking of, if you chose, and no harm could result, unless one were intentionally malicious. To prove to you how mistaken this idea is, we proposed to refer to certain circumstances connected with you—not to a third party, you know, but directly to your face—and see what your impression would be. Now, in point of fact, Mr. Truman, in speaking of your husband, refers simply to the heavy loss sustained six months ago, through the failure of Barnes & Burton. It was certainly ‘disagreeable,’ and businessmen often find it hard to ‘weather such troubles.’ And that
was all Mr. Truman said. And yet, my dear friend, did you get any sort of an idea what he meant?"

“And I,” said Mrs. Watson, “meant nothing in the world but the fact that you told me yourself about poor Flora having been kept awake with the tooth-ache every night for a week; if that isn’t trouble, I don’t know what is. To be sure, I didn’t say anything about toothache, but then I meant that.”

“And I meant,” said Mr. Watson, “that I didn’t see how you bore being broken of your rest so much; and it’s a fact, I don’t.”

Mrs. Truman chimed in again: “And Mrs. Marks, I referred, if you remember, to the ‘peculiar circumstances’ by which you are to be surrounded next week. Aren’t house painters and two dressmaker’s trials enough for one week to merit the term ‘peculiar?’ You told me yourself about them, and that is all I meant; but how were you to know it?”

You are to remember that Mrs. Marks was a sensible woman; a woman who meant right. To say that she was no indignant to the very verge of endurance with her callers would too faintly express her state of mind; and yet she really had received a lesson such as a week of mere talking would not have shown her. It began to dawn upon her that the manner of conversation of this insane party was strikingly like her own, when she felt a desire to give some item of news and yet decided that she would better not; and yet could not, or did not, resist the temptation to throw a tinge of mystery around her story. She sat looking thoughtfully from to the
other of her guests, reflecting whether she should, in a dignified manner, ask then to be kind enough to retire and leave her in quiet possession of
her own house, or own that she was severely and richly rebuked.

They on their part were waiting for the result in no little anxiety; for now that the excitement of the thing was passing they began to realize that it was a severe practical test of her pride, and they were not practical jokers by profession. Indeed, an eager desire to prevent mischief in the future had impelled them. Mrs. Truman had intentionally woven into the plan certain phrases, such as ‘peculiar circumstances’ and the like, which Mrs. Marks had been in the habit of constantly using. They had been recognized, and almost against her will that woman had been led to go over rapidly certain conversations in which she had indulged.

She realized, as she had never done before, how fraught with meaning her ambiguous phrases might have sounded. All this passed rapidly through her mind, and though her pride was stung to the quick and her indignation was great, she did what was, perhaps, the best thing to be done under the circumstances—she laughed. At the first outburst of this nature her callers joined, and the laugh became full and uncontrolled.

Mrs. Marks’s very first words, after the laugh had subsided, were words of wisdom: “Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth!” she said, slowly and thoughtfully.
“‘The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity!’” quoted Mrs. Truman. “How true this it! I tell you our tongues need closer looking after than any other part of us. I feel the force of my own temptation in this direction as I have never done before.”

“She bore it splendidly!” said the callers as they trooped home one hour afterward, having eaten apples and nuts in Mrs. Marks’s best parlor and departed on better terms with her then they ever had been before, feeling a degree of respect for her that all her prudence; and charity, and foresight had never been able to evolve. For Mrs. Marks had by that first laugh routed Satan, and he slunk away, feeling himself vanquished. Since she would not he angry, even under those circumstances, that battle was lost.

“Splendid!” repeated Mr. Truman. “She is a better woman than I ever thought her. I’ll own up, now, that I never believed her habit of using her tongue to be so free from malicious intent, as it evidently is.”

“Nor I,” said his wife. “I had serious doubts, and they made me dislike her. I thought even her professions of charity were affectations. But I was evidently mistaken in her. On the whole, I feel meeker tonight than I have in a good while. I guess I have been looking down from a serene height on Mrs. Marks and her clique. But there are more ways than one of entertaining Satan. Now, I should have ordered this entire party out of my house and invited them never to come again, if they had talked to me as we did to her tonight.”
“‘Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,’” quoted Mr. Truman thoughtfully, as he applied his night key. “A careless use of her tongue is evidently one of Mrs. Marks’s burdens, and I guess we ought to have tried to help her, instead of contenting ourselves with criticizing her.”

THE END