

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. HOPKINS GOSSIPS

The home of Representative Hopkins was not a very imposing edifice. It was a modest frame building standing well back in a little yard at the outskirts of the village, and Mrs. Hopkins did the housework, unaided, to save the expense of a maid. It never occurred to the politician, who had risen from the position of a poor stable-boy to one of affluence, to save his wife from this drudgery. To him poor Mary was merely one of his possessions, and it would have astonished him to know that her sharp tongue and irritable temper were due to overwork and neglect. The Honorable Erastus was not averse to champagne dinners and other costly excesses while at the state capital, and his fellow legislators considered him a good fellow, although rather lax in "keeping his end up." Moreover, he employed a good tailor and was careful to keep up an appearance of sound financial standing. But his home, which he avoided as much as possible, had little share in his personal prosperity. Mary Hopkins's requests for new and decent gowns were more often refused than acceded to, and he constantly cautioned her to keep down expenses or she would drive them both to the poor-house.

The woman well knew that Erastus could afford to keep her in luxury, if he would, but some women are so constituted that they accept their fate rather than rebel, and Mary Hopkins lived the life of a slave,

contenting herself with petty scoldings and bickerings that did nothing to relieve her hard lot.

She had little interest in politics and resented the intrusion of the many who came to the house to see and consult with her husband during the tiresome political campaigns. On these occasions Mr. Hopkins used the sitting-room as his office and committee headquarters, but this did not materially interfere with his wife's comfort, as she was usually busy in the kitchen.

On this Saturday evening, however, they had an early supper and she finished her dishes betimes and sat down to darn stockings in the sitting-room. Erastus had hurried away to a meeting of his henchmen in the town, and would not be home until after his wife was in bed.

So she was rather surprised when a timid knock sounded upon the door. She opened it to find a little, lean man standing upon the porch.

"Mrs. Hopkins?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes. What do you want?"

"Your husband asked me to come here and wait for him. It's important or I wouldn't disturb you."

"Well, then; come in," she replied, tartly. "Thank the Lord this thing

is nearly over, and we'll have a few weeks of peace."

"It is rather imposing on you," remarked the man, following her to the sitting-room, where he sat down with his hat in his hands. "A political campaign is trying to everybody. I'm tired out and sick of the whole thing myself."

"Then why don't you chuck it," she retorted, scornfully, "and go to work makin' an honest living?"

"Oh, this is honest enough," he said, mildly.

"I don't believe it. All them secret confabs an' trickery to win votes can't be on the square. Don't talk to me! Politics is another name for rascality!"

"Perhaps you're right, ma'am; perhaps you're right," he said, with a sigh.

She looked at him sharply.

"You don't belong in Elmwood."

"No, ma'am; I'm from beyond Fairview. I've come to see your husband on business."

She sniffed, at that, but picked up her darning and relapsed into silence. The little man was patient. He sat quietly in his chair and watched her work.

His mildness disarmed Mary Hopkins. She was not especially averse to having him sit there. It relieved the loneliness of her occupation. On occasions she loved to talk, as Erastus had long ago discovered; and this visitor would not try to shut her up the way Erastus did.

"You don't often get out, ma'am; into society, and such like," ventured the caller, presently.

"What makes you think that?" she demanded.

"A woman can't keep a house neat and trim like this, and be a social gadder," he observed.

"You're right about that," she returned, somewhat mollified. "If I was like them girls up at Elmhurst, fussin' round over politics all the time, this house would go to rack an' ruin."

"Oh, them!" he said, with mild scorn. "Them girls 'll never be housekeepers."

"Not for a minute," she affirmed.

There was another pause, then; but the ice was broken. A subtle sympathy seemed established between the two.

"What do you think of 'Rast's chances?" she asked, presently, as she threaded new cotton into her needle.

"I guess he'll win. He's worked hard enough, anyhow."

"Has he?"

"Yes; 'Rast's a good worker. He don't leave any stone unturned. He's up to all the tricks o' the trade, is 'Rast Hopkins!"

Here he began shaking with silent laughter, and Mrs. Hopkins looked at him curiously.

"What are you laughing at?" she inquired, with a sniff of disdain.

"At--at the way he come it over the gals up at Elmhurst. 'Rast's a pretty slick one, he is!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, settin' that 'Liza to watch 'em, and tell all they does. Who'd a thought of it but 'Rast Hopkins?"

"I don't see anything mighty funny about that," declared Mrs. Hopkins, contemptuously. "The girl's too pert and forward for anything. I told 'Rast not to fool with her, or she'd make him trouble."

"Did you, now!" exclaimed the man, wonderingly.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Hopkins, pleased to have made an impression. "I suspected there was something wrong about her the morning she came to the house here. And she changed her name, too, as brassy as you please."

"Well, I declare!" said the visitor. "Did you know her before that, Mrs. Hopkins?"

"Why, I didn't exactly know her, but I seen her workin' around Miss Squiers's place many a time, and she didn't seem to 'mount to much, even then. One day she stole a di'mond ring off'n old Miss Squiers and dug out, and I told Nancy then--Nancy's young Miss Squiers--that I'd always had my suspicions of the hussy. She hid the ring in a vase on the mantle and they found it after she was gone."

"Well, well! I didn't know that about her," said the man, looking with admiration at Mrs. Hopkins.

"That's why I told 'Rast not to have any truck with her, when she came here bright and early one morning and asked for work."

"Oh, she came here, did she?"

"While I was gettin' breakfast. She said her name was Eliza Parsons, an' she was looking fer a job. I told her I knew her record an' to get out, and while we was arguin' 'Rast come out and took a hand in the talk. She laughed and flirted with him outrageous, and said she was a stranger in these parts, when I'd seen her many a time at Miss Squiers's."

"What was her name then?" asked the man.

"I think it was Rosie--or Lucy, or something--. Anyhow, it wasn't Eliza, and that I'll swear to. But the girl laughed at me and made such silly smiles at 'Rast that he told me to shut up, 'cause he had a use for her in politics."

"Well, well!" repeated the visitor. "Just see how stories get twisted. I heard you gave the girl a letter to your cousin Martha."

"Well, I did. 'Rast wanted to get her in at Elmhurst, to watch what Forbes was doing to defeat him, so he made me write the letter. But how'd you know so much about this girl?" she inquired, with sudden suspicion.

"Me? I only know what Mr. Hopkins told me. I'm one of his confidential men. But he never said how he happened to find the girl, or what he knew about her."

"He didn't know nothing. He'd never seen her 'till that morning when she came here. But he said she was clever, and she is, if pertness and a ready tongue counts for cleverness. I suppose he pays her for what she tells him about Forbes, but he'd better save his money and fight on the square. I don't like this tricky politics, an' never did."

"I don't either," declared the man. "But I'm in it, and can't get out."

"That's what 'Rast says. But some day they'll put him out, neck and crop, if he ain't careful."

"Is the girl Eliza much use to him?"

"I can't say. He drove her over to Elmhurst that morning, and he drives over two or three evenings a week to meet her on the sly and get her report. That may be politics, but it ain't very respectable, to my notion."

"Well, the campaign is nearly over, Mrs. Hopkins."

"Thank goodness for that!" she replied.

The visitor sat silent after this, for he had learned all that the poor gossiping woman could tell him. Finally he said:

"I guess your husband's going to be late."

"Yes; if he ain't more prompt than usual you'll have a long spell of waiting."

"Perhaps I'd better go over to the hotel and look him up. I have to get back to Fairview tonight, you know."

"Do as you please," she answered carelessly.

So Mr. Burke, for it was the detective, bade her good-night and took his leave, and it was not until after he had gone that Mary Hopkins remembered she had forgotten to ask him his name.

"But it don't matter," she decided. "He's just one o' 'Rast's politicians, and I probably treated the fellow better than he deserved."