

GOSSIPING

By Daniel A. Lord, S.J.

What Gossips, Male and Female, Do to the World

DICK voiced the feelings of the entire group graphically, if slangily:

“Oh, boy! I never saw the good old moon strut her stuff better.”

“That,” commented Sue, his twin, with sisterly irony, “is what I call poetry.”

The father and the mother of the Bradley twins found their comfortable porch chairs and sank into them contentedly before they deigned a second glance at the moon. The dinner had been exceptional, a sort of celebration to honour the first day of father’s precious two weeks of vacation, and, with middle-aged instinct for ease, they found that even a moon was more beautiful when viewed from a deep wicker chair.

But Father Hall, with that unageing youth of his, stood between the beloved twins, hands clasped behind his back. It was one of his rare dinners out, a concession to his long friendship with the Bradleys, who spent summer after summer in his parish at Lakeside.

From the edge of the veranda he looked at the shimmering highway of light that stretched across the lake towards the black line of hills on the horizon, where the moon was suspended like a steel war-shield which some giant had polished and hung up against the dark velvet of the sky.

“Yes,” agreed the father of the twins. “It’s beautiful.”

And he promptly spoiled it all by striking a match, the yellow flame of which competed exasperatingly with the calm, cool light of the moon.

The Tribute of Silence

“It’s too beautiful to talk about,” sighed Sue.

“Most beautiful things are like that,” agreed Father Hall. “Like what?” asked his host, the end of his cigar glowing like a tiny, miniature rival moon.

Father Hall looked back over his shoulder.

“Oh, I’m just re-airing an old theory,” he apologized. “Things that are deeply beautiful inevitably hold us silent. We realize the inadequacy of words to describe them; so we pay them the sensible tribute of saying nothing.”

“You mean just beautiful scenery?” Dick asked.

“I mean beautiful anything—mountains or moons or oceans or great, unselfish loves or tremendous sacrifices or devoted friendships or paintings or buildings or music—anything really beautiful or great.”

Father Hall walked back to the comfortable chair which by unspoken consent had been left for him. Sue sat down on the top step, her head resting back against a pillar, while the moon ran long silver fingers through her bright hair. Dick fumbled for a cigarette and sat down opposite his twin. All were caught in the silent loveliness of the night unconsciously verifying Father Hall’s pet theory.

The Family Debate

But it was their host who rudely broke the spell.

“Evidently that bridge gang of yours,” he said emphatically to his wife, “didn’t have anything beautiful this afternoon to keep them silent,”

“They had your wife,” she answered sweetly.

“They must be used to her,” he went on. “At any rate, even the beauty of my wife wasn’t making them live up to Father Hall’s theory.”

He turned towards the priest.

'I came up the walk from my car this afternoon and found two tables of 'em here on the veranda. Two tables, eight women, count 'em. And if the Stock Exchange during the panic makes more noise, you may feed me a day's supply of ticker tape. My stars, what chatter!'

'I suppose, my dear,' his wife retorted with suspicious mildness, 'that when eight men get together they sit and pretend they are deaf and dumb?'

'Do they need to pretend they are dumb?' was Sue's helpful contribution.

'Look out, young lady,' shot back her father. 'People have said you resemble your dad.' Then, towards his wife, 'Of course men talk. They talk a lot. But they talk sense, and one at a time, not in chorus. Conversation with them is interchange, not interruption, and much less interference.'

'Hop to it, dad,' cheered his son.

'Don't mind them, Father,' Sue cried to Father Hall. 'My mother and father really love each other, but when they start debating men versus women, it's something to write the sporting editors about.'

But Mr. Bradley was not to be turned aside.

'And if it weren't for their friends, what would women talk about? Now, men talk sport and business and shows and—and--'

'Man, the perfect.' jeered his wife.

Gossips Both

'Well,' said Father Hall, deliberately egging them on, you must admit that women do seem to get a world of entertainment out of pulling an absent sister's reputation limb from limb.'

'A man leaps to the defence of a man,' commented his hostess sadly.

'You bet he does,' her husband retorted proudly. 'We men stick together.'

But Father Hall was not finished.

'Women get almost as much fun out of it as—as men do raking over a choice scrapheap of gossip.'

'Traitor!' shouted his host, while his family roared at the hit.

'Well,' said Mrs. Bradley, in a gesture of public confession, 'I must admit we women are far from perfect. Bob here was pretty much right about this afternoon. We played some bridge, but there were two of the ladies who—well, when they come, an afternoon is a few hands of bridge completely surrounded by gossip. And what they can do to a reputation would fill a tabloid. Why, oh, why, are so many good women such awful cats?'

'From the tongues of good women, O Lord, deliver us,' prayed Father Hall earnestly.

'Since we're being honest,' her husband supplemented, 'I'll admit that men aren't much better. We love our scandal, too, and a crowd of men will claw the reputation of everyone they know, from the president of the corporation to the girl at the switchboard. And when they haven't got facts to tell, they use their imagination.'

Tabloid Stuff

'Commonest fault in the world,' agreed Father Hall.

'But why?' demanded Dick.

'Even at school,' Sue contributed, 'nice girls, girls who really are awfully decent about other things, won't hesitate to say the most terrible things about other girls, things that leave the girls' reputations in rags.'

'When you mentioned the tabloids a minute ago,' Father Hall said, 'I couldn't help but see a connection. Why do the mass of the people eat them up? If one of their editors suddenly decided that after a certain issue he'd print only pleasant things about people, the heroic acts they'd performed, the happy marriages they'd made, the temptations they'd successfully resisted, he'd be sure that within a month he could file for bankruptcy.'

'So he goes on printing the scandals, fills the first page with murders, and the diary of the fair adulteress, and the story of the supposedly respectable banker's secret sins, and the fact that an ungrateful daughter kicked her father out of his

home—and counts on running circulation up to a million.”

“It’s the same instinct, apparently, that makes the average man or woman get a bigger thrill out of hearing scandal about an absolute stranger than good about a dear friend.”

“And that’s the same instinct that makes one hundred thousand people go mad when one pugilist socks another in the jaw and lays him cold,” said Dick.

His cigarette end made a parabola of light as he shot it out on to the lawn.

“It seems to be a sort of blood lust,” he went on. “Tell a crowd of fellows that some chap saved a blind beggar from an onrushing express train, and they yawn and say, ‘Yeh? And then what?’ But just hint off-hand, ‘So-and-So got into a heck of a mess last night,’ and you have a hypnotized audience before you start your next sentence.”

Mean Tongues, Mean Minds

“It’s a mean sort of spirit, isn’t it?” Sue put in. “I always feel low and contemptible after I’ve helped pull some girl to pieces.”

“And you have every reason to feel that way,” Father Hall agreed frankly. “Gossip is a sop to one of the meanest of human instincts, the instinct to pull down anyone who rises ever so slightly above us. A tramp sees a brilliantly lighted window in the home of a successful lawyer, so he heaves a brick through it. A painter whose pictures have been rejected by the hanging committee slits with a knife the canvas of a successful artist. The actor whose bad work loses him a role sits in the audience and hisses the successful actor who fills his place. And the average man and woman take refuge from their own failures and shortcomings by tearing to pieces anyone who has surpassed them.”

Mr. Bradley knitted his brows.

“Not quite clear,” he admitted. “Just what do you mean?”

Father Hall explained.

“Every one of us is just selfish enough to hate to see anyone rise above him. We all like to feel we are the best, that no one beats us in anything. Besides, we want to be the centre of attraction and the receiving end for whatever bouquets are being handed round. That is a perfectly natural longing and the basis of much fine ambition.”

“But it is also the basis of very much uncharitable talk, scandal, and gossip. We see someone brilliantly outshining us. Our immediate instinct is to dim the lustre of his achievements. And gossip will do just that. A singer finds her rival unmistakably winning the public favour; critics know at first hearing which has the better voice, so the singer tells about the time her rival broke down completely and was laughed off the stage. A business man sees his neighbour pass him on the road to success, so he tells about the secret scandal which shows that, though that neighbour is a success, at heart he is a rogue and deeply unhappy.”

“Two women hear another consistently called an angel, though no one thinks of calling them that. How they gloat over the shocking story in which she trails her wings in the dust and spatters mud on her angelic robe!”

“Whenever anyone rises above the level of the mob, the mob reaches up to pull him down. If the mob cannot reach him, it can at least smirch his success and find unsavoury satisfaction in his unhappiness or his sins. Someone has the great gift of winning friendship, while another chap is left alone; the latter finds strange consolation in planting the seeds of distrust in the breasts of the other man’s friends.”

“Whenever a man stands on a pedestal surrounded by admirers, the vandals and the failures shoulder their way through the crowd to point insistently at his clay feet.”

Envy, Mother of Gossip

Mr. Bradley nodded understandingly.

“That’s the reason,” he said, “that the higher the rank of the person, the choicer the piece of scandal and the more the people feast upon it. Jack, the ditch-digger, gets drunk, and nobody cares a snap. Jackson, the senator, takes a little too much, and gossip is on him like a pack of hounds. Equivalently, everyone is saying, ‘Look! He seemed so great and

successful. But really, with all his prominence, he does things that I wouldn't do. I'm better than he is, after all."

"It looks rather like a sop to envy," Mrs. Bradley agreed. "Then that's why," commented Sue, "pretty girls are the one the other girls talk worst about."

"And really prominent men at college," Dick chimed in.

"And married couples who seem to have made a success of their marriage," added their mother.

"It's the herd instinct to drag down the leader," Father Hall went on. "We get to dislike him just because he is so continuously successful. The ancient Athenians had nothing against one of their greatest benefactors except the fact that everyone kept calling him 'the Just', so they promptly proved he wasn't so great by driving him out of the republic."

"We all have that sad instinct. Some man is great, and with deep delight we suddenly discover his weaknesses or defects and rush about telling them. It's as much as to say, 'You see? He's just as human and just as weak as we are.' Some woman is wonderfully beautiful. Her dimmer rivals exult if they can say, 'Yes, beautiful; but she's not as virtuous as I am.' Some chap is making more money than I am, but I'll whisper that I know of his secret unhappiness. Some man is making a national name; but if you'll listen, I'll tell you about the scandal that marred his youth."

"You see, it is often difficult to reach the leaders with real physical attack. It is always possible to reach them with scandalous gossip. I cannot strike that successful lawyer next door without the police taking a hand. But I can blight his character. Pulling the hair of that beauty in our block, after whom the boys are running, is not being done by ladies. Tearing her reputation to pieces and hinting darkly at why she is so popular with the boys is done by a million ladies, young and old."

Seeking the Spotlight

"So gossip whirls around the heads of the successful, the beautiful, the popular, the prominent, just because the mob dislikes them and resents their success. And what is true of the nationally great is equally true of the leaders in any group of society."

"Early in life," the priest went on, "I found out that I was quickest and most anxious to gossip about people who competed with me and beat me. I was magnanimous to those I could beat. I was deeply critical of those who beat me. I was tolerant and kindly towards people who were plainly beneath me. I was merciless towards those who dared pass me in any sort of race. In other words, my gossip was invariably an admission of inferiority on my part. Envy was its legitimate mother."

"Perhaps I'm saying much the same thing," Mrs. Bradley ventured, "but I've noticed that women often enough gossip just because gossip gets them the spotlight. When books or plays or current events are being discussed, the conversation is general, and one needs brains to take a leading part in it. But when a piece of gossip is being retailed, the spotlight goes straight to the speaker, and she is the centre of a hushed and attentive audience. Gossip, so to speak, tells itself. It needs neither brains nor cleverness to make it interesting."

Brilliant People Don't

"I've watched a woman who has been a little out of the general conversation grow restless," she went on. "No one has been paying any attention to her. She has no ideas to contribute to the talk about intellectual subjects. But there is a moment's lull, and then, with a jump, she has gained the focal point of attention with 'Did you hear about Mrs. So-and-So's affair with her young doctor?' Others have been too much noticed; she has been neglected; but just as the conversation is getting completely out of her reach, she pulls the whole company her way with a choice bit of scandal. Gossip gets her the spotlight."

Father Hall nodded.

"Quite right," he agreed. "For just that reason really brilliant people do not need to gossip. They have subjects to talk of that are worth listening to. They have fresh ideas to contribute to any conversation. They are given attention no matter what they have to say. They are leaders, with no one to pull down, and hence they can afford to be generous."

“A really great man is usually generous in his attitudes towards lesser men. An exceptional beauty does not need to build up her reputation by deriding the charms of mediocre women. A saint has no necessity for calling into question the goodness of ordinary men. The brilliant, fluent conversationalist or the really well-informed man or woman does not have to pull attention to himself or herself by resorting to scandal or gossip. They command the spotlight; they do not steal it. Gossip, whatever way you look at it, is an admission of inferiority.”

Out on the lake the put-put of an outboard motor broke the evening’s calm silence. But the group on the porch, though they watched the black shadow cut across the silver highway of the moon, were not disposed to drop the subject they had been discussing.

Seriously Sinful

“What astonishes me,” Father Hall resumed, “is the perfectly calm, blissful way in which people go along sinning terribly by uncharity and gossip with never a thought of the seriousness of what they do.”

“Oh” Mrs. Bradley said apologetically, “it’s just thoughtlessness.”

“That isn’t much of an excuse when terrible harm is done.”

“Rather not,” Mrs. Bradley agreed. “If an engineer thoughtlessly runs an express train into an open switch when the signals are all set against him——”

“Or a chap absentmindedly throws a lighted cigarette into a tank of gasoline——”

“Please! Please!” protested Mrs. Bradley, waving her hands.

“A truck driver the other day ran down a little boy,” Sue went on, disregarding the protests. “When he told the bystanders that he wasn’t watching the street, they almost mobbed him.”

“The only thing we can say for thoughtlessness,” Father Hall summarized, “is that it saves many people from being actually guilty of what in itself is serious sin.”

“That sounds bad,” said Mr. Bradley. “Are gossip and uncharity frequently serious sin?”

“Any person who knowingly reveals the secret serious sin of another to persons who have no right to know is guilty of mortal sin.”

“That’s not altogether clear,” Dick said.

“We can clear it up with two or three cases,” the priest exclaimed. “A group of women sit down to a bridge table——”

“Oh,” cried Mrs. Bradley, “why pick on the poor women?”

“We’re just beating them to it,” her husband retorted.

“One of the players,” Father Hall continued, “the night before was looking out of her bedroom window when the daughter of her nearest neighbour was carried into the house drunk to the point of complete unconsciousness. I suppose I might have said ‘intoxicated,’ but ‘drunk’ is precisely what I mean. Now, no one knows of the girl’s serious lapse except this one midnight watcher. But as soon as the bridge players are seated, the woman pushes away the cards, and, with all the unction of her little gossipy soul, she begins: ‘Last night I saw that young daughter of Mrs. Nextdoor carried into her house dead drunk. As she says those words she commits a mortal sin. She has told the unknown serious sin of another to a group of people who have no right to know it.’”

“A group of men sit down to lunch——”

“Well, thank goodness,” Mrs. Bradley interrupted, “the men are getting theirs, too.”

Secret Sins

“The conversation turns to a well-known business man of their acquaintance. One of the men has recently stumbled upon a scandalous affair in the private life of this acquaintance, an affair which thus far has been hushed up. But the discoverer entertains the group at lunch with a circumstantial recital of the scandal. He has committed a mortal sin.”

Dick looked up in protest.

“Do you mean to say, Father, that we can never talk about anyone’s serious sins without sinning seriously ourselves?”

Father Hall smiled.

“You missed something. You didn’t notice that I insisted on secret sins and sins that the person to whom they are told has no right to know. You may, for example, discuss as much as your common sense and good taste allow the crimes that figure in the headlines. The senator who is caught stealing or taking bribes is as much a legitimate subject for conversation as the latest hammer slayer. The notorious village atheist or the comic village drunkard can hardly regard their sins as secret; nor need we.”

“Or, suppose we all see the young lady we were talking about carried in dead drunk. To us the occurrence is not a secret, and we may, among ourselves, talk about it, though it is certainly kinder and better not to do so. And if the young lady is known throughout the neighbourhood to make a practice of such homecoming, though we alone saw that particular offence, it would not be a serious sin to tell about it.”

“Public sins, notorious sins, sins that everyone in a community knows have been committed, may be talked of without sin.”

The Right Person

“And remember, too, that I said, ‘told to a person who has no right to know.’ Let’s suppose that I alone know that a certain banker is a thief. I did not, of course, learn this as a professional secret. My partner tells me he is going to turn over his money to this banker; I have a perfect right to warn him by disclosing what I know of the man’s crookedness.”

“Instead of telling her bridge partners, the midnight watcher feels that the mother of the girl should know of her daughter’s delinquency. Though she may not be very welcome, she certainly has done no wrong in telling a mother what she has a perfect right to know about her daughter’s conduct.”

“A sweet girl is trustingly marrying a chap whom you, Dick, know to be morally, though secretly, rotten. You would do a fine thing if you let the girl know what later on, when she found it out for herself, would wreck her life. You would do, probably, the wiser thing if you told her father or mother.”

“In the same way, though we all hate tale-bearers, there are times, at school, for instance, when we have the positive obligation of telling secret sins of others. We stumble on serious breaches of moral conduct among the students that are doing the school real harm. We must tell the proper authorities. That is not tale-bearing. Still less is it gossip. It is simply saving the school and other students from grave harm.”

Mrs. Bradley laughed quietly.

“Forgive me,” she said, “but I was just thinking how few gossips would get any fun out of reporting that sort of thing to the proper authorities. There’s no snap or thrill in telling people who ought to know. That’s not sport. That is helping someone, preventing further evil, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the viewpoint of your thorough-going gossip. It’s the savage instinct to kill, not the desire to help, that drives the scandalmonger on.”

Dick’s logical mind had been turning all this over.

“You’ve been talking only about serious sins,” he said. “It seems to me that a chap can sometimes tell things which aren’t serious, but which do more harm to a reputation than if he repeated a major crime.”

“Quite correct,” said Father Hall. “If the person concerned in the story is one whose reputation could be blasted by telling things about him that are not seriously sinful, that might easily be a mortal sin. Tippling isn’t a mortal sin. Yet if, for example, one told that a priest was a secret tippler, though never really drunk, it might blast his reputation, and be mortal sin for the one who told it. If one told that a banker was gambling (and didn’t add that it was with trifling sums of his own money), the case might be the same. It would all depend on how his efficiency was impaired and his reputation injured. So, too, even a breath of scandal about the name of a woman might ruin her reputation, result in her coming marriage being prevented, and end by spoiling her life. Circumstances, here as elsewhere, alter cases.”

Plain Murder

Mr. Bradley lighted a fresh cigar; in his interest he had pitched a half-finished one out into the darkness.

“Philosophically speaking——” he began.

“Why, dad!” teased his daughter.

“——what is it that makes gossip so serious a sin?”

“Fundamentally, it is a form of murder. Cold and deliberately a knife is driven into a reputation. Ruthlessly a character is slain. A fair name is ruined in the eyes of others. And in the eyes of mankind, as in the eyes of God, everyone has the same right to his reputation and fair name that he has to his life. Gossip is a sort of spiritual murder.”

“At every word a reputation dies,” quoted Mrs. Bradley.

“That’s a horrible way of looking at it,” Sue said.

“But Father Hall is right,” her father answered.

Dick broke the momentary silence.

“I don’t want to seem to be defending gossip,” he said, “but I can’t see where you’ve made any allowance for the fact that a person may be telling the strict truth. I can understand how, if a fellow lies about a chap, it’s pretty serious. But, after all, truth is truth——”

“But there are truths which may not be told,” Father Hall interrupted, “all sorts of them. The priest hears them in confession; the business man in secret conferences; the doctor and lawyer hear them in their office conferences. And I may not use even truth to slay the most precious natural thing a man possesses next to life itself, his reputation.”

“Of course, if what one tells is a lie, we call that calumny, and it is an even more serious sin. For, bad as it is to tell secret sins that really have been committed, it is unspeakable to tell as true sins of which the person is innocent. But whether the story of the sin be true or false, it slays a character, and that is serious always.”

A Lost Girl

They were silent once more, and it was Sue who picked up the threads they had momentarily dropped.

“As you’ve been talking,” she said, “I’ve been thinking of the harm I’ve seen gossip do. A new girl came to school in my junior year. She was a sweet girl, and everyone liked her from the start. I never saw a girl who attracted me more. Though from the very start she made friends easily and gracefully, we all noticed a certain shyness about her. She seemed at times almost afraid of us. Both faculty and girls noticed a hurt look that would sometimes come into her eyes, just as if she distrusted the whole world. But it wasn’t two months before she had almost completely lost her shyness and reserve, and one hardly ever noticed the hurt look. We accepted her gladly and made her our friend.”

“Just about Thanksgiving time a visitor came, one of those terribly talkative girls from a small town. I saw her as she met our new classmate in the hall, and saw, too, the look of fear come into the girl’s eyes once more.”

“I didn’t see the visitor again, but by nightfall there were little groups with heads together everywhere in the school. She had rushed right off from meeting the girl, assembled her friends in the school, and told them, with circumstantial detail, a piece of gossip about our new friend. Oh, it was just some yarn about a scrape, followed by dismissal from her old school. By the time it reached me, one would have thought our poor girl had lost her friends and had been forced to leave her home because of it. And to this day I don’t believe a third of it was true.”

Sad, But Frequent

“Well, overnight the frank welcome of the girls turned to distrust. The newcomer was looking for a change and saw it at once. She couldn’t very well miss the growing suspicion in the girls’ attitude, and the way they turned to look after her as she passed. I tried to get her to talk to me, to let her see that I didn’t believe the story. But within a week she had gone; and when she left I saw in her eyes the same hurt, frightened look, only intensified and deepened. One gossip retailing a single unfortunate scrape, and this girl’s chance of remaking herself was completely ruined.”

“Sad, but quite, quite frequent.”

“Indeed it is,” Mrs. Bradley agreed. “I remember so well the young couple who came to live near us shortly after we were married. I never had seen a happier pair. She had an instinct for home-making, and he was evidently making his way

in the business world. Then, one afternoon, just after lunch, she came to see me, almost staggering into my arms. She wasn't crying, but her whole body was trembling as if she were chilled to the bone."

"I made her sit down, and with my arms still about her, I listened to the story. Poor child! She had to talk to someone. A gossip had come in to see her, and, with a fine pretence of friendship, had told her, almost before she knew what she was listening to, of a sordid love affair that had almost ruined her husband's bachelor days. I tried to point out that he had pulled himself from the mess, made himself a new life, found her love, and that he was surely making her happy. The poor girl went away holding her chin bravely in the air, but I knew things could never be the same. They weren't. I sat helpless while I watched their beautiful married life going to pieces on the rocks that gossip had cruelly thrown before them."

"Oh, we all know cases like that," Mr. Bradley said. "Some chap, in a youthful impulse to make a little easy money, borrows from his employer's cash register with every intention of repaying it. He is caught, though, before he can repay, his story becomes the common property of his community, and, as soon as he can, he pays back and leaves that part of the country. (You remember how Sidney Porter, our O. Henry, ran away from the blight of a scandal like that.) This chap makes up his mind from that moment to live with scrupulous honesty. He does so, makes a name for himself in a new part of the country, and is on the threshold of success. Then the gossip comes, the story of his youthful slip is repeated, his reputation is blasted overnight, and the future which he has been patiently building up is snatched from his hands."

A Blighted Career

Though Father Hall was silent, through his mind were parading the hundreds of similar instances he had met— women with characters smirched, homes falling to ruin, men refused positions or advancement, love cooling, hatred developing, all because of some gossip's wagging tongue.

But Mr. Bradley was continuing.

"Maybe you've never heard me tell this incident, though it has hurt me as much as anything I've ever come in contact with. About ten years ago I met and became interested in a young business man. He was clever, upright, and a comer. I felt a sort of personal responsibility for him, and suggested his joining our downtown luncheon club. He was delighted. So I got him in. In return for this he used to take me into his confidence about his prospects and about the girl he was going to marry as soon as he got his next rise."

"It happened that our club was having a lot of trouble in securing competent cloak-room girls. So, as the members only came in for an hour or so at lunch time, we fired the girls, installed a locker-room, and gave every man his own locker and key."

"Then in rapid succession five or six members reported losses from their lockers. Money disappeared, gloves, a brief-case, even an overcoat and a set of golf clubs. Of course we had to put a stop to that. So we hired a detective and set our trap. Two or three lockers were left open, the detective was hidden in another. Complete secrecy was imposed upon the club's officers."

"My young friend was out of town and had not heard of the thefts. So, on his return, he strolled into the locker room, hung up his things, and, as he turned from his own locker, noticed that in the open locker beside his was a most unusual-looking brief-case."

"He had been planning to buy a new case, and this one attracted him as precisely the sort he'd want to get. So he leaned over, picked it up out of the open locker (a foolish but perfectly natural thing to do), and as he stood with the bag in his hand out popped the detective, like one in the last act of a mystery play, and said, 'Come with me.'"

"The house committee came dashing in at once, and when they found my young friend looking terribly sheepish and startled, with the detective's heavy hand on his shoulder, they laughed, listened to his perfectly simple explanation, and asked him to forget the unpleasant episode.

Gossip Never Dies

“That should have ended the matter, but it didn’t. One of the house committee told the story as a good joke. The club gossips got hold of it (with a bow to Mrs. Bradley, I must admit there are plenty of them), and rolled it over on their tongues. In no time at all the story was taking its swift and crescendo course. ‘Is it true that Dave So-and-So was caught taking things out of lockers?’ ‘You’ve heard, of course, that Dave So-and-So was caught robbing lockers.’ ‘They hushed it up pretty carefully, but everybody knows that Dave So-and-So is the locker thief.’

“The gossip was carried home to the wives of the members. The wives passed it around the bridge tables.”

All the original details were now transmuted, and the story, with more or less ornamentation, was simply that Dave was a thief. The only one who didn’t seem to hear it was Dave himself, blissfully going on his honest, straightforward way.”

“Finally, the club officials realized that they had to take some action to stop the spreading gossip. A letter was sent to every club member explaining how the story started, and asking for silence or truth. That was only fuel to the flames. ‘Ah-ha!’ said the gossips, with their usual incredible logic. ‘If they have gone to the trouble of denying it, there must be something to the story.’”

“Of course, a thoughtful friend brought the news to his sweetheart, and, luckily for him, if she was that sort of girl, she broke their engagement. His employers heard of it. He gave them the explanation, but with an appalling, paralysing sense of helplessness. At first they stuck nobly by him, but finally they called him in and told him that, though, of course, they didn’t believe the yarn, the forest fire of gossip that had spread around him was so intense that it was simply ruining his efficiency. They offered him a post in another town; but, with proper pride, he turned it down.”

“Then he came brokenheartedly to me. What could he do? How could he fight it?”

“Well, what is there to do when treacherous gossips are stabbing in the dark? I advised him to leave, even though leaving seemed to put the seal of truth on the accusation. He did so. Innocent though he was, he left position, friends, home, everything, and went to start life anew in a distant city. Thank God, the fire of gossip did not leap the intervening distance to scorch him.”

“I never heard that before,” said Dick. “You never told it when I was around.”

“Perhaps it hurt me too badly,” his father replied.

“The terrible part of it is,” Mrs. Bradley said, “that once a story is started nothing seems to be able to stop it. All the denials in the world have no effect. Explanations seem lame and foolish. For twenty people who listen eagerly to the gossip, not one listens to the truth about the story. A hundred gaily repeat the scandalous story, while not one takes the trouble to repeat the facts that knock the scandal on the head. There’s simply no other way of stopping it. It keeps sweeping on and on and on, just as long as there are people to tell it and people to listen.”

A Slandered Priest

“A priest meets so many of the victims of gossip,” Father Hall said. “I remember a story that was prevented from becoming tragic only by the most startling courage of a priest friend of mine in a small town. Deliberately a group of bigots set out to ruin his reputation. In dark corners, secretly, without the possibility of his finding out where the stories originated, they whispered their scandalous lies about him. Almost before he knew what was going on, the flames burst out on all sides.”

“The poor man had spent his life for his people. Suddenly he was an outcast. A few loyal friends stuck to him, but the town as a whole drew back, shuddering piously as he walked down the street. At that point the story becomes one of astounding courage, for he determined to fight it out. He got the names of his accusers, met them one by one, dared them to their faces, beat scandal with truth, threw open his whole life for anyone to read, and carried the fight into the camp of his enemies. Ultimately he won; but with victory in his grasp, he staggered away from his people and his town a broken, crushed man, ready to die. Even in his triumphant vindication, gossip had killed him physically.”

“Do you all remember Ring Lardner’s wonderful story, ‘Haircut?’ asked Sue.

They all did.

“That did me a lot of good,” she continued. “Whenever I find myself listening to gossip or whenever I feel tempted to repeat it, I think of that unspeakable travelling salesman taking down the names of shopkeepers as his train sped through little towns, and then writing them anonymous letters suggesting that their wives were not faithful. A great joke to him, and sheer tragedy to his victims. That wouldn’t make a bad definition of gossip: A joke for the listeners; tragedy for the victim.”

“We read a Spanish play in school last year,” Dick put in. “Queer name, but I’ll never forget the plot. Right along the line of what we’re talking about. A young fellow and a lovely young married woman were just good friends. Nothing whatever of evil between them. Then gossip started to whirl about them. It grew and grew, though they knew nothing about it. Finally, it burst above their innocent heads. They found themselves pointed out as lovers. At first they were startled and terrified and indignant. They were guiltless; they had never thought of love as possible. And then, the playwright goes on, the gossip threw them into each other’s arms. Gossip made them think of the sin of which they were not guilty. The craving for mutual protection against the world that had slandered them made them become what that gossip had called them.”

“Oh,” Father Hall cried almost impatiently, “we could go on indefinitely. Gossip causes terrible, innumerable tragedies. ‘Your niece doesn’t like you, does she? You know, she said to me the other day . . .’ and relatives are at daggers’ points. ‘Is your husband’s stenographer a blonde? I thought it was he that I saw with a sweet-looking little blonde at luncheon the other day,’ and suspicion is sown between a hitherto happy couple.”

“The terrible little whispering campaigns of gossip! The setting of friends against friends! The suggestion of suspicions that never, never die! The tragedies that begin with ‘Now, if you weren’t my friend, I wouldn’t tell you, but he said about you . . .’ and ‘She seems such a lovely girl, but I heard that she . . .’ or ‘He’s a nice young fellow now, but when he was a young man. . .’”

Stabbed in the Back

“And it’s so utterly cowardly! There’s no real chance to defend oneself. One can’t strike back. It’s like fighting ghosts and shadows, and snipers who shoot from safe hiding places. The assassin who stabs in the back takes some slight physical risk. The gossip takes none. His victim is absent, unable to defend himself, helpless against the poison that drops from venomous tongues.”

“He may never know what really happened, why some dear friend suddenly turned against him, why he read unaccountable suspicion in the eyes of acquaintances. And all the while his betrayer works in darkness, at a safe distance, without the possibility of his victim’s striking back. It’s a coward’s game no matter who plays it.”

Mrs. Bradley shook her head protestingly.

“Why do you keep saying ‘he’ and ‘him’? Women suffer more from gossip than men, and perhaps (now I’m making a confession to Mr. Bradley) women are the worse gossips. You’d think that women would stick together defensively, wouldn’t you? But they don’t. How they love to pull another woman down! How they drag her secret sins into the light! There’s nothing so cruel as a woman to a woman! Cats? Isn’t ‘tigers’ a better name?”

“I’m afraid,” Dick said quietly, “that boys are pretty cruel to women, too. Perhaps you don’t know how boys love to brag about their conquests. Why, when they get together, it’s how many girls they’ve kissed, and how many scalps they’ve dangled at their belts, and how they tricked the girls, and how easily the girls fell for it. Kissing and telling is just plain rotten gossip, but I’m afraid, with a lot of fellows, it’s much like a sportsman with his trophies. But it’s tough on the girls.”

“Yes, it is cruel,” Father Hall agreed. “For the sake of a boast or a laugh thousands will blast another’s character. The boy who boasts of his conquest of some poor, silly girl who foolishly trusted him is betraying her twice. He’s a cold, cruel, unspeakable cad.”

“But the man or woman who uses gossip simply to win a laugh is almost equally cruel. You and I have met people

with rapier-like tongues. They flash a brilliant story and run it through a quivering reputation. They drive a caustic comment up to its hilt into a soul. They strike sparks of wit, and with them kindle flames that burn down happy, peaceful homes. Like the most brutal of the old pirates, they cut a throat amid roars of laughter. They slay with a ribald jest on their lips.”

“And usually,” said Sue, “there is so little foundation to gossip.”

“It starts as a rumour,” Mrs. Bradley agreed, “and ends as a fact. It starts with a ‘perhaps,’ and finishes with an ‘absolutely.’ In three repetitions it has ceased to be vague suspicion and has become authenticated history.”

Who Are We to Judge?

“And if you track it down,” Mr. Bradley added, “it’s generally a story that somebody heard from somebody who got it from somebody else. You remember the old song, ‘A friend of mine told a friend of mine that a friend of his told him.’”

“Or,” suggested Dick, “it’s like shaking the hand that shook the hand that shook the hand of John L. Sullivan.”

“Most gossip,” Father Hall agreed, “is like ghost stories, or the legends of sea serpents. It’s third-hand or fourth-hand stuff, seldom anything that anyone in the company has actually seen.”

“Sounds almost funny put that way,” said Dick.

Father Hall’s voice was almost grim.

“That doesn’t keep the results from being terrible. Doubts and distrusts are scattered, never, never to be forgotten. Enmities, dislikes, suspicions grow up between dear friends. Lives are blighted, careers nipped in the bud. No one but God news the terrible fruitage of the uncharity, gossip and slander sown so carelessly, so heedlessly.”

All were silent for a moment, and when Father Hall spoke again, his voice had dropped two full tones, though it had gained in passionate intensity.

“And who are we to sit in judgement on any man’s conduct? Who are we to say why someone has done a thing that seems all wrong to us? What do we know of human motives? How do we know the thousand temptations resisted before that soul finally fell under the terrible pressure of repeated attacks?”

“We see a man, as he passes a fruit stand, stealthily pick up an orange. In our hearts we despise him for his petty theft. How do we know that he has walked the streets for days looking for work, that his pockets are empty, and that he is going home, despair in his soul, to a little child craving a fruit?”

“Silly example, but all life is much like that. What do any of us know of the fight the human soul makes before it yields to sin? Some Catholic woman marries after a divorce. We condemn her ruthlessly. Of course, she has sinned; she has done something forbidden by Christ Himself. But we had better not throw the first stone. Perhaps she struggled for years before finally she yielded.”

“I Am Afraid to Gossip”

“In my desk at this moment is a letter from a woman planning such a second marriage. There is stark tragedy in that letter. A lady bred, she has struggled for three years to make a go of her life. She was pitifully hungry for food when she wrote me the letter. She is facing an operation, and hasn’t a penny. A man, not a Catholic, is offering her what he thinks is marriage, and with it love, a home, money, protection, all that she craves. I know she should be strong enough to resist, and I know that God gives her the grace. But I am thanking God that I have not her temptations to fight. She is wrong, but who am I, in my sheltered life, to lay a bitter, gossipy tongue upon her?”

“I am afraid to gossip. I am afraid that the sins at which I hold up my hands in horror may seem light in the eyes of Christ compared to my own sins. I am afraid to think what I might have done had I been faced. with the same temptations that have been met by the souls on whom I am prompted to look contemptuously. Perhaps in God’s sight I am more guilty than they. No saint, that’s sure, ever had an uncharitable word for any man or woman. The saints were too busy with the defects they found in themselves to give anything but tender pity and understanding to the sinners whom Christ had deigned to lift mercifully from the gutter. If the pure Christ had nothing but pity for sinners, I have small right to pull them

to pieces or whip them with a contemptuous tongue.”

Father Hall’s voice had grown more and more intense. At the close it was almost like an impassioned whisper that died off into silence. But Mr. Bradley spoke.

Too Busy for Small Stuff

“Quite true,” he said, “and a viewpoint I’m afraid I never thought of. I don’t gossip—at least, not much—because I think that gossip is for small, unoccupied minds. Men of big affairs are too busy to gossip.”

It was Dick who once more protested.

“There’s just one difficulty, Father. Aren’t we ever going to talk about people? Must we always be talking about stocks and plays and sports and books? After all, people are the most interesting things in the world, and we’ve just got to talk about them.”

Father Hall stood up.

“Dick,” he said, “God and mankind are the only two things in the world worth talking about. Nothing, not the most beautiful mountain range nor the most wonderful piece of art, has any significance except in so far as it refers either to God or man or both. So by all means talk about people. Talk all you can about them. But talk beautifully of them. That’s all we ask.”

“Search out their splendid heroisms and talk of them. Tell of their unselfishness, their generosity, their idealism. Find the big things they have done in art and literature, in social life, in their secret souls. Drag those things into the light.”

“With mankind hungry for nobler things, why should we spend time only with men’s sins and women’s frailties? There’s all the wide range of man’s aspirations and achievements, all the loveliness of woman’s virtues for you to talk about.”

Father Hall suddenly lifted up his hand towards the moon.

“Let’s take the moon for the symbol of the man or woman who talks beautifully of mankind. Everything that the moon touches is more beautiful because of its touch. The moonbeams turn filth into silver, dark things into light. The moon smiles gently on lovers, benignly on old age, approvingly on youth. Everything it touches it beautifies. Everyone on whom its beams rest is better for its contact.”

“Far-fetched? I don’t think so. The man with the lovely mind finds beauty in everything, touches the filth of humanity and covers it with silver, turns darkness into light. He is interested in everything human, gentle to everything human, understanding and sympathetic always.

“But,” and he turned quickly, “my analogy is limping badly. There is so much that is fine and noble and beautiful in the world that I pray God I may never waste time on things that are low and ugly and sinful. I pray that I may see the best, know the best, and love to talk about the best. Let all of us leave gossip for small minds and uncharity for mean minds. For us only the best and finest that is in humanity.”

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EDWARD FENNESSY,
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