

A Little Widow

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As the centers of culture have their women's clubs, their Lenten lectures, classes in this or that, morning bridge, matinées, and afternoon teas, so Zenith included and combined them all in its Ladies' Aid Society; obliterating the boundaries separating these various manifestations of the eternal feminine, but retaining the spirit of each.

A narrow interpretation of the name and purpose of the organization might seem to limit its activities to the worthy, if uninteresting, altruism of the good Samaritan; but to the initiated this would appear as the unimaginative, uninspired reading of a purist in phrasing.

Although ostensibly what its name proclaimed, the Society was also a forum for the discussion of the hour, and a foyer for the display of fashions. It not only served as a weekly excuse for such feathers and furbelows as Zenith could muster; it was also an exchange for borrowing and lending, for "news and pottage," the gossip of the bazaar; and this was but the half, for the keen edge of interest was constantly whetted by its politics, its cabals, its intrigues, which not infrequently flamed into swift debate and impassioned and acrimonious oratory.

Reduced to its last analysis, the Aid Society was easily symbolized as the feminine brain of Zenith, passionately protected from the rough, disintegrating touch of man, who for some reason regarded it as a menace to his material comfort and mental supremacy and ever sought, but vainly, to dissolve it.

But perhaps its meaning, its hold upon the affections and its place in the life of Zenith are more clearly presented in the words of Mrs. Thomas, one of the most prominent members, than by any contradictory and halting descriptions.

"How'd ever us poor women bear our lives without the Aid Society?" she was wont to ask. "It gives us somethin' to dress up for once a week, an' somethin' to sharpen our wits on an' loosen our tongues over at the same time. Besides, we're a-doin' for the heathen in the uttermost parts of the earth, an' the poor that's always with you—when you don't set the dog on 'em."

At the present time Mrs. Thomas was voicing her devotion to the organization more loudly than ever, for it was the mellow season of fruitage, the season for the distribution of plums. To explain—it was the fall of the year, a time set apart for the annual disbursement of the funds of the Society for materials which, during the winter months, were made up into garments by the efficient members. Some of these articles were packed into missionary boxes and sent to remote quarters of the globe, while others were distributed to the sick and destitute nearer home.

This, the most important event of the year in the Society, meant the appointment of a committee of ladies who should take a day from their household duties and journey to Mt. Tabor, a mining town ten miles distant, there judiciously to expend the moneys entrusted to them; for Mt. Tabor boasted a shop which was not a mere combination of post-office, grocery, and feed store, with a few bolts of calico and flannel upon its rough shelves; but a shop which flaunted the name and, in a measure, presented the appearance of a department store. This Mecca was always spoken of as “over to Hayman’s.”

But a day or two before the called meeting of the Society, when the selection of a committee was to be determined by ballot, a rumor, arising from some unknown source, but spreading like the proverbial wild-fire, had it that a committee, composed of the President of the Society, Mrs. Evans, and four or five of her intimate friends, had virtually appointed itself and was already engrossed in making out a list of the materials to be purchased. This rumor, whether founded or unfounded, was received with a disappointment and consternation which spent itself in sound and fury.

“Oh, shucks!” said one phlegmatic sister, after listening to these breathings of ineffectual ire from a new and active member, “what’s the use of all this roaring? If Mis’ Evans an’ her click has resolved to be the committee, why, we can all regard the matter as settled. Go they will.”

“My patience!” returned the new-comer in Zenith, exasperated to the point of plain speech, “you’re all terrorized. Of course they’re goin’, if the rest of you are willin’ to sit back an’ let them; but this committee, as I understand it, is not appointed, but elected. Now, how’s Mis’ Evans an’ her crowd goin’ to be elected if we don’t vote for ‘em? Why, we got the game in our own hands. We’ll canvass a little on the quiet, get our folks in line, and elect our own committee. Nothing easier.”

The old resident swayed back and forth in her rocking-chair and viewed the speaker curiously. "I guess you don't know what you're talkin' about," she said simply. "Mis' Evans is smarter than greased lightning, and she's went an' got up on—oh, what's this here thing?—parliamentary law. Some of the rest of us tried it; but we couldn't make head or tail of it. She always gets ahead of everybody else. And now, when any question comes up before the Society, she'll listen very patient—when things is goin' her way; but if the opposition dares to speak, she's down on 'em with both feet, rapping the table with that new tack-hammer she bought for the purpose, an' callin' out sharp: 'No question before the house,' or 'not in order,' or somethin' like that; an' she's got her crowd to working so slick that it's 'meeting adjourned,' 'second the motion,' 'adjourned,' before you can get your breath."

The new-comer listened with scornful incredulity and, to do her justice, did make a daring and spectacular, if ineffectual, effort to free the subsidized society from the yoke of Mrs. Evans and her "click:" but in her attempts to break boss rule, she suffered the cruelest disillusion of the reformer: that swift, poignant shock of seeing her most ardent adherents melt from her standards, fail her utterly at the crucial moment when she called for their support; and while she still strove to rally her forces, the erect, impassive little President, sitting nonchalant and unconcerned in her chair, with poised gavel, had, by some rapid and bewildering reading of parliamentary law, carried all before her, elected her committee, and was receiving congratulations before the opposition quite understood how it had all happened.

Following the usual precedent, on the ensuing Saturday the Committee, in what was regarded by the opposition as offensively jubilant spirits, took the train for Mt. Tabor with the important list of materials to be purchased written out large and plain on a full sheet of white foolscap paper and carefully tucked away in Mrs. Thomas' handbag, she being the only one of the party who possessed such a receptacle.

Mrs. Evans and her four intimates occupied two seats facing each other, while the Missionary, Frances Benson, a member of the Committee by courtesy, sat alone across the aisle. Mrs. Landvetter had scarcely entered the car before she drew from her pocket her inevitable lacework, and now sat by the window, her eyes fixed on her flying needles, and her mouth pursed counting the stitches. Mrs. Evans sat beside her, trim and upright, neat as a pin, her hands crossed in her lap, and her little feet, of which she was inordinately proud, barely touching

the floor. Opposite was Mrs. Nitschkan, whistling softly through her closed teeth, her knees crossed, her soft hat on her lap, and her hands in the pockets of her coat. And then, Mrs. Thomas, a Venus colossal, joyous excitement in her blue eyes, tremulous smiles on her lips, smoothing mechanically her tight-fitting black kid gloves, which she kept in tissue-paper for funerals and great events like the present. Occasionally she paused to dispose more carefully, over the back of the seat, a rusty crêpe veil depending from her hat, and to settle more firmly the pink bow at her throat.

“Marthy Thomas,” said Mrs. Evans suddenly, after gazing at her friend for some time in critical disapproval, “it don’t seem to me just in taste for you to be wearing a crêpe veil down your back and a pink bow in front.”

Mrs. Thomas looked at her for a moment in grieved surprise, and then her face assumed an expression of childish resentment. “I don’t see why not,” she combated. “I think it looks awful nice,” appealing to the unsympathetic audience of her friends. “This pink bow,” touching it with one black-gloved finger, “sort of shows that I’m in the world again, and,” bridling coquettishly, “am open to offers, while this crêpe veil shows I ain’t forgot poor Seth in his grave, an’ can afford to mourn for him right.”

A discussion of the propriety and legitimacy of these subtle intimations of the state of Mrs. Thomas’ feelings and her attitude toward the world might have continued indefinitely, had not a diversion been created.

A tall, thin man with a worn and lined face, eyes deeply sunken in his head, and an expression at once satirical and sad, sauntered through the car;—paused to speak to Frances Benson, and, after a word or two, took a seat beside her.

“My Land!” whispered Mrs. Thomas, in agitated consternation. “If there ain’t Walt Garvin sitting down beside Missioner! That don’t look just right to me.”

“I guess there’s no doubt but what he’s the wickedest man in the county, and he’s sure the richest,” returned Mrs. Evans complacently, gazing at him with that admiration which is the tribute strength pays to strength, ambition to ambition.

“Vat makes Walt so bad?” asked Mrs. Landvetter, looking up from her knitting a moment. “I ain’t neffer heard of his doing anything so fierce.”

“He’s an atheist or near it,” returned Mrs. Evans, “and it ain’t what he’s done

that's so bad, it's what he thinks."

"That's it," agreed Mrs. Nitschkan robustly. "Perfessers can slip through the straight an' narrer gate now an' then, an' kick up their heels in pasture, an' it don't count against 'em like it does against sinners."

"Missioner acts mighty pleasant to him," ventured Mrs. Thomas doubtfully.

"She's got to be." Mrs. Evans spoke sternly, regarding the Missionary with that protecting, tolerant awe, the tender impatience the Marthas of this world feel for the Marys. "She's wrestling for his soul, and," with a meaning glance, "she ain't being pleasant to him in your way, Marthy."

But the journey was but ten miles long, and, before Mrs. Thomas could attempt to refute the imputations of friendship, the train pulled in to Mt. Tabor; Mr. Garvin assisted the ladies to alight, bowed, and went his way, and the Committee proceeded up the sunshiny street which led to "Hayman's," with the momentous work of the afternoon before them; but slowly they went, and somewhat heavily. Something of the alert briskness, the fresh enthusiasm with which they had started out, had vanished; a silence fell; and each seemed occupied with her own thoughts, and scarcely had they gone two blocks when Mrs. Thomas paused irresolutely and then stood still, her soft, indefinite features expressing a mulish obstinacy.

"I don't see why we got to begin right now," she complained. "Why can't we have a few minutes to ourselves? Experienced shoppers like us can go through that list like locusts through a pea-vine."

She turned her mutinous gaze upon her companions; but, for once, she failed to encounter the censure she expected, and realized instead that they were regarding her with an almost admiring approbation.

"There's some sense in what Marthy says," remarked Mrs. Evans, turning briskly to the Missionary. "We ought to arrange this thing so there'll be some system about it. Now, all of us ladies has probably got some little errands of our own to 'tend to, an' here we are with time to burn before us. Let's see. It's just one o'clock now," looking up at the clock in the square, wooden belfry of the little church, a gray, squat, unlovely tower standing out clearly from its background of deep blue sky and rugged mountains. "Now, why wouldn't it be a good plan for each of us to take an hour to 'tend to any little thing we may have

on our minds, and agree to meet at 'Hayman's' at two o'clock sharp? We got to take the half-past five o'clock train for home, and that'll give us just three hours to go through the list, an' you girls know that it ain't really going to take us one hour."

This plausible statement was warmly confirmed. Only the Missionary wavered, but her hesitating objections were quickly overruled, and almost before her lingering doubts were voiced she saw her companions rapidly disappearing in various directions and found herself standing alone in the village street with an hour's time before her, to make what use of she would.

Slowly, rather aimlessly, she walked along the broad board sidewalk to pause presently before the window of the one book-shop the village boasted. While standing there gazing earnestly, if unseeingly, at the dusty and fly-blown contents, she heard her name spoken in a familiar voice and turned quickly to find Garvin again at her side.

"Not shopping?" he asked in surprise.

"No," she replied. "The others had some errands to do, so we are all to meet at two o'clock at 'Hayman's.'"

"But two o'clock is an hour away. Come," persuasively, drawing his watch from his pocket, "we have plenty of time for a little walk, and I have been wanting to show you a view from that mountain yonder." He indicated with a wave of the hand a mountain which rose steeply at the end of the village street and blocked the continuance of that thoroughfare. "It beats any view in Zenith."

The Missionary hesitated. "Shall I have time?"

"Of course," he reassured her. "It's only about a ten minutes' climb. Come."

She yielded with a smile. Who could have resisted the invitation of this afternoon in late October? The air was mild; there was a soft languor in the touch of the wind on one's cheek; the earth lay in a sort of dreaming brightness, and the hillsides were like vast, changing mosaics of color, inwrought, overlaid, inlaid with the gold of the aspens, the crimson and flame of the maples, the green gloom of the pines; and from farther purple mountains rose the white peaks sharply, coldly distinct against the deep, bending blue of the sky.

This was the scene that Garvin pointed out to Frances Benson as they reached the objective point of their climb, and as she looked upon it her dark eyes glowed in their depths, and her lips curved in sudden, rare smiles. There are certain temperaments so susceptible to color that it acts upon them as an intoxicant, and Frances Benson's was one of these. "Oh, the glory of it! The wonder of it!" she whispered. Then, as if seeking relief from the almost unbearable splendor, she turned her gaze down toward the little town, peaceful and bright in the afternoon sun.

"Things look more tidy here than in Zenith;" she caught self-consciously at the commonplace, abashed by her recent emotion.

"They surely do," Garvin answered. "By the way," diffidently, "I noticed last Sunday that the church looked pretty shabby. Do you think they'd let a sinner like me have it painted?"

She clasped her hands impulsively and looked at him with grateful, delighted eyes. "Oh, if you only would! You say that you notice that the church needs painting. Well, I notice that you are there almost every Sunday now, and I—I—am so glad."

He twisted his mouth in a queer little smile as he looked at the sun-drenched ranges.

"M—m, yes," he said dryly, "I'm always there when you're going to preach."

"Oh, I can't preach." She was really abashed now, the color tinged her cheek, and she drew back and spoke deprecatingly. "I just talk a little, just of the things that come to me to say," she explained eagerly.

He looked at her with wonder, even a curious, speculative awe. "That is why we come," he said. "If you gave us a real sermon, I guess none of us would be there. We've heard too many of them," with a short laugh. "It is you we wish to hear."

"Oh, no," with a deepening of the eyes, a strange, incredulous smile, as if she spoke from some secret conviction. "It isn't me. It's The Word that's drawing you."

"Maybe it is," he answered, influenced for the moment by her belief. "Maybe," he sighed, and then smiled in amused scorn of himself. "Well, well, let it go at

that, anyway. Then you think I'll be allowed to paint the church?"

"Indeed, yes. Look at the shadows on the hills, Mr. Garvin! You can see them move. Oh,"—with a start—"it must be nearly two o'clock. Oh—h—h," looking at her watch, "it is half-past two. What will they think of me?"

She hastened down the hill at such speed that he could scarcely keep pace with her, and with a mere, preoccupied nod left him at the door of "Hayman's;" but to her shamefaced relief, after making a tour of the shop and questioning clerks and proprietor, she discovered that none of the other members of the Committee had yet arrived. In order that no time might be wasted in seeking her when they did appear, she returned to the street and, standing just outside of the doors, awaited her coadjutors.

Minute after minute passed, the shadows lengthened, the wind grew chill, yet still Frances Benson kept guard alone, starting at every footfall, occasionally consulting her watch, her face growing each moment more anxious and dejected. At last, long after three o'clock, Mrs. Evans rushed down the street like a small cyclone.

"Oh, Missioner," she gasped, clutching Frances Benson's arm with her strong, little hands, "I jus' stopped a moment at Mrs. Whalen's,—the dressmaker, you know,—to talk to her about the best way to make up my new dress, an' she got to showin' me some patterns an' talkin' about the styles. She's just been down to Denver, you know. Well, they's a complete change in sleeves in the last month; an' she got to showin' me how to get the new flare into the skirts and all; an' 'fore I knew it, sure's you're alive, it was after three o'clock. My land! I don't know when I ever did such a thing before. Where's the other girls?" without pausing to take breath. "In buying, I suppose?"

"They haven't come," said the Missionary, in a tired, flat voice. "You're the first."

Mrs. Evans fell back a step or two. "They ain't come!" she repeated shrilly, as if the thing were unbelievable. "Ain't come?" in a crescendo of incredulity. "An' Marthy Thomas has got the only list the ladies made out, in her handbag. Oh, why didn't we take a copy? We might have known that Marthy'd do something like this. She ain't no more to be depended upon than the wind. Did you happen to read over the list, Missioner?" clutching at a straw.

“Just once,” answered Miss Benson, “but it doesn’t help me. I can remember it in a general way, but that’s all. I don’t recall it well enough to buy a spool of thread.”

“No more do I,” groaned Mrs. Evans.

“How would it do,” offered the Missionary tentatively, “to ask Mr. Hayman to keep his store open to-night? Then, if we find we can’t get through before train time, we can hire a conveyance and drive to Zenith this evening.”

This suggestion was scarcely made before it was acted upon by Mrs. Evans; but she presently returned from her diplomatic mission in what, for her, was a crestfallen state.

“He says,” dejectedly, “he’d like to accommodate us; but they’s a surprise party at his house to-night. His friends are going to surprise him with a gold watch and chain, and he’s got to go home ‘specially early to get cleaned up and study over his speech of thanks. I asked him if he wouldn’t keep open an hour or two to-morrow; but he passes the plate in church, and he says he wouldn’t break the Sabbath that way to oblige nobody.”

Her companion sighed. “I guess there isn’t anything to do but wait, then.”

“There sure ain’t,” returned Mrs. Evans, with her usual decision.

At first they talked a little; but as the minutes were slowly ticked away by the open watch in the Missionary’s hand, they fell to silence. A wagon laden with hay or ore occasionally lumbered past, a pedestrian, now and again, turned to gaze at the two lonely watchers; but still they waited, a somber and weary pair.

Mt. Tabor is closely encircled by mountains, and when the sun drops suddenly behind them like a great, flaring disk jerked by a string, night comes on quickly.

The deepening twilight and the cold wind from the peaks increased the anxiety of the watchers. The crawling minutes ticked themselves monotonously away, and the tension was growing almost unbearable, when Mrs. Evans suddenly peered forward. “I thought so,” she said in tones of relief. “Here comes Landvetter.”

“Hello, girls,” cried that huge Teuton jovially. Then, with unusual volubility.

“Vere vas de odders? Still buyin’? I vas a liddle late; but I t’ought dat didn’t make no difference, since all you ladies vas so goot buyers. Ven ve find dat ve haf dat hour, I yust stopped in to Miss Kemmerer’s. I ain’t seen her for two, tree months, und I find dat her daughter Minna, she is yust home from de old country mit so mooch laces in so many patterns. Mein Gott!” with a fat chuckle, “I did not know how de time pass ven I get to lookin’ at dem. Vell,” noticing at last that something was wrong, “vat’s de matter?”

“Matter!” exclaimed Mrs. Evans. “Matter enough! Marthy Thomas ain’t showed up yet with the list.”

“Hein?” cried Mrs. Landvetter, in uncomprehending bewilderment. “You ain’t bought nutting! Marthy ain’t come mit de list! Mein Gott! Mein Gott! Vat ve goin’ to say to de S’ciety? Dey was kickin’ enough about lettin’ us come anyway. Und nutting bought, nutting bought!” She shook her head slowly from side to side, repeating the words as if trying to grasp their import.

“Here comes Mrs. Nitschkan,” broke in the Missionary hopefully, as that cheery Amazon rolled down the street through the gathering gloom.

“Gosh A’mighty!” called the gipsy, when she was within hailing distance; “what you all huddled here for, like so many wet hens? All done, an’ waitin’ for me? Well, you got to excuse me, girls, but I just thought I’d let the rest of you go ahead with that buyin’. I’m no good at that kind of work. I tell you what, though,” laughing, “I’ve had the great afternoon. I hadn’t hardly left you all, when who should I run across but the Thompson boys. They’ve just took a lease on the ‘Pennyroyal,’ you know, an’ they wanted me to go up an’ look it over. Well, I know the history of that mine from way back. ‘She’s got a bad name, boys,’ I says, ‘but I always believed she hadn’t never been worked right.’ Well, I went through some of the new drifts with ‘em, and I chipped off some specimens.” She pulled two or three of these from her coat pocket and fingered them affectionately. “They sure look mighty good to me. Well, it’ll soon be time to start for home. Where’s Marthy?”

“Yes, where is Marthy?” broke out Mrs. Evans shrilly. “That’s what more of us than you, Sadie Nitschkan, would like to know. We ain’t bought one thing,” her voice rising hysterically.

“You—ain’t—bought—one—thing!” repeated Mrs. Nitschkan, in stupefied

astonishment. “You ain’t bought one thing! Say it again, Effie.”

“No, we ain’t,” snapped Mrs. Evans. “However should we?”—exasperated beyond endurance—“when Marthy Thomas has cavorted off, Lord knows where, with the only list we got, in her pocket.”

Mrs. Nitschkan almost collapsed; her powerful and strongly knit frame became limp and flaccid. “Gosh A’mighty!” she whispered weakly, leaning against the wall. “That beats all; but,” rousing to the necessity for action, “something’s got to be done. Time’s short. Can’t we just go in and buy any old thing, Effie? Anything’s better’n going back empty-handed. You know how the Society went on about our bein’ a standin’ committee, an’ how we just had to railroad things through to get here at all. Say, Effie,” pleadingly, “there must be some way out. Why, us ladies’ll be shamed before the whole of Zenith.”

“Oh, don’t talk to me,” cried Mrs. Evans, goaded beyond control, the tears starting to her hard, bright eyes. “There ain’t nothin’ to do. This is a judgment on us fer bein’ such a pack of fools as to trust Marthy with that list.”

Mrs. Nitschkan, with the nearest expression to worry that her face could possibly assume, drew a stubby pipe from her pocket and thoughtfully prodded the tobacco into it with her thumb. Still abstractedly, she lighted a match, and then suddenly dropped it from the shielding hollow of her hand, as she cast one quick glance up the street.

“Here she comes now,” she cried.

Eagerly they bent forward, to a man, and then simultaneously drew one long, heartfelt sigh.

Through the dusk might be seen approaching the slow and reluctant figure of Mrs. Thomas. There was a frightened expression in her wide, blue eyes, there was confusion and apprehension; but there was also the reminiscent gleam of excitement and a joyous irresponsibility, which faded speedily in the chilling atmosphere whose belt she presently entered.

There was no word to greet her, only the cold reproof, the bitter indignation of three pairs of eyes.

Mrs. Thomas fumbled with the buttons of her coat and swayed slightly from side

to side, the corners of her mouth drooping like an accused child's.

"I guess you girls all thought I never was gain' to show up; but you're all such smart, experienced buyers that I knew you wouldn't need me. I s'pose you're all through now?"

"Was you quite aware, Mis' Thomas,"—Mrs. Evans' voice was as cold as ice and sharp as a two-edged sword—"Was you quite aware that you had walked off with the list, the only list that us ladies had to go by, as you very well knew?"

Mrs. Thomas' jaw dropped, the pink of recent happy experience faded from her cheek, she cast timid eyes quickly over the little band, and then fell into the blunder of explanation. "Why, why -after you all had left, agreein' to meet in an hour, I met Willie Barker, an' he says, 'Come into my drug store an' have a ice-cream sody,' an' I went, an' he set up the sody an' a big box of candy, chocolate creams an' caramels, and—and—then he had his new horse an' buggy hitched in front of the store, an' he wanted me to let him drive me up the road a piece—an'—"

"And of course"—Mrs. Evans' face was white, her eyes were blazing, her lips set in a thin line—"you had to cavort off with a spindle-shanked, knock-kneed, mush-brained jack-rabbit like Willie Barker, with no thought of the shame you was bringin' on the Committee. You know," passionately, "that to get here at all, we had to hustle like Injuns an' work every scheme that's known in parliamentary law. You know that I set up nights studyin' my manual, an' seein' how I could throw dust in the eyes of them that wanted to down us. Oh-h-h!" She drew in her breath with a long, hissing sound and clenched her hands in impotent indignation.

"I didn't mean no harm," wailed Mrs. Thomas, wiping her streaming eyes on the back of her hand, a movement hampered somewhat by the fact that her handkerchief had been fashioned into a bag to hold the remaining chocolates, and was tied tightly to her thumb. "I clean forgot the old list. I—I—" accepting the Missionary's proffered handkerchief and sobbing audibly and unrestrainedly, "I don't see why you're all so hard on me."

"I'd like to take a stick to you," growled Mrs. Nitschkan savagely. "Good land! What do you want to flirt around with Willie Barker for? Can't you never leave the boys alone? What for did you have to go an' bring this trouble on us? If you

hadn't no respect for the rest of us, you might have thought of Missioner."

"You ain't no call to talk to me like you was a she-bear, Sadie Nitschkan, an' I ain't a-goin' to take your sass," retorted Mrs. Thomas, goaded to some show of defiance; but her weak burst of petulance died, and she cowered against Miss Benson, as Mrs. Nitschkan's small eyes narrowed, and she began the ominous preparation of rolling up her sleeve.

"We mustn't be too hard on her," interposed the Missionary. "I—I wasn't on time, either. I—" with an effort—"was walking with Mr. Garvin."

"Yes, but you was tryin' to save his soul," quickly interposed Mrs. Evans, "while Marthy Thomas was just foolin' an' playin'. Don't go for to excuse her, Missioner. She—" with a glance of scorching scorn—"wouldn't know how to go about savin' the soul of a flea."

Mrs. Thomas wept afresh at this indictment of spiritual incapacity.

"Ah, we mustn't be too severe," pleaded Frances Benson, encircling the culprit's generous waist with her arm. "I was no better," with a pale smile. "I forgot the time, too."

But Mrs. Evans was deaf to this desire of her idol to step from her pedestal and was determined to keep her there at all hazards.

"Course you didn't," she cried. "You was in a hand-ta-hand grapple with the Devil, an' you hadn't no time to think. When a sinner like Walt Garvin's in question, Satan's doin' some mighty pretty fightin' to hold him."

"Wasn't all you ladies on time?" asked Mrs. Thomas eagerly, a hopeful suspicion dawning in her eyes.

Mrs. Evans froze her with a glance. "It ain't goin' to do you a mite of good to try an' ferret out the sins of others. Your own is scarlet enough. Maybe," as if generously conceding a point, "one or two of us was a minute over time; but that's nothin' to do with you."

"Listen!" said Mrs. Nitschkan authoritatively, bending her ear toward the ground. "I thought so," with an air of finality; "the train."

As if to confirm her statement, a whistle sounded in the distance.

It was a sad little group that slipped aboard the railway coach ten minutes later and took their seats in silence and dejection; a silence and gloom which lasted until more than half the distance was traversed, and was only broken by what seemed an irrepressible giggle from Mrs. Thomas. Doubting the evidence of their senses and appalled by this unseemly mirth, the Committee turned shocked and astonished eyes upon the penitent.

The color had come back to her cheeks, and the light to her eyes. "Say, girls, what do you think? While we was out ridin' this afternoon, Willie flashed an awful cute motto on me. It was on cream-tinted paper, an' it had a red an' blue border, an'," simpering consciously, "it says in black an' gold letters, 'A Little Widow is A Dangerous Thing.'"

The Committee was too stunned for speech. For the first time in her existence, Mrs. Landvetter dropped her knitting and, indifferent to the fact that it had fallen to the floor, sat staring at Mrs. Thomas and murmuring: "You can't neffer tell." Mrs. Nitschkan had fallen back, speechless for the moment; then she uttered, "Gosh A'mighty!" in an awed whisper and allowed her glance to travel slowly over Mrs. Thomas' well-cushioned six feet of womanhood. "A—little—widow!" she muttered huskily.

Even the Missionary stared and sighed.

Mrs. Evans alone remained oblivious. Throughout the journey she had sat with her arms folded on her chest, her chin sunk, her eyes fixed unseeingly upon the floor; but as the train pulled into Zenith, she lifted her head with one of her quick movements, the old alert intelligence and resolution in her face. Her glance passed over the disgraced Mrs. Thomas and rested upon her coadjutors, and then she addressed them briefly as might Napoleon his generals:

"I bin a-thinkin' while some was yelpin'"—Mrs. Thomas cringed—"an' I come to this conclusion: that there's always pretty nearly a remedy for a thing, or there's none. Now, I think I got the remedy; but I'm a-goin' to ask you ladies, one an' all, to keep your mouths shut. If folks come botherin' round to find out what all we done, you just tell them to wait till the meetin' Monday afternoon, an' they'll see. I've got a kind of plan workin' in my head."

Relief showed in every face. A long experience had taught her friends to place a

rather implicit confidence in this mistress of resource.

“But, Mrs. Evans,” objected the Missionary gravely, “don’t you think it’s the only square thing to do, and far better, just to tell the truth to the ladies on Monday afternoon?”

They all exchanged alarmed glances. Such a course would be a virtual abdication of empire.

“No, I don’t,” returned Mrs. Evans shortly. “I ain’t thinkin’ of any such thing. You mind that fortune-teller we went to, Sadie Nitschkan? Well, do’ you remember she looked at my hands, an’ she says: ‘You’re bound to get into scrapes, ‘cause you’re one of them active temperaments that’s got to be always helpin’ others; but you won’t never get into a scrape,’ she says, ‘that you can’t swim or fly out of.’”

“You bet that’s so.” affirmed Mrs. Nitschkan devoutly. “Now, Effie,” as they stepped from the train, “we’re a-puttin’ our trust in you. If you can pull us out of this bog, you’re goin’ beyond yourself; but you can depend on the rest of us to throw off the scent any nosy coyotes that comes snuffin’ around.”

This agreement the Committee adhered to; but on the momentous Monday afternoon, when they assembled for the meeting, they seemed to have grown thinner and paler over night. There were worried lines upon their faces, their eyes looked heavy, as if from lack of sleep. Only Mrs. Evans wore a placid demeanor and a calm brow. There was no trace of care in her expression, although, as Mrs. Nitschkan intimated to Mrs. Thomas, this was a straw which must not be regarded as indicating too correctly which way the wind blew.

“You know Mis’ Evans,” she remarked, “an’ if you don’t, I do. Why,” dreamily, “I can just see that woman on the Day of Judgment. St. Peter’ll be readin’ off her sins, an’ she’ll never quail. She’ll stand there, maybe with Hell yawnin’ at her feet, just lookin’ him straight in the eye. An’ I’m tellin’ you now, after a ten minute talk with Effie Evans, he’ll take off his hat an’ let her pass. Managers like her is needed in Heaven, I guess. Specially there, I shouldn’t wonder, considerin’ all the flabby brothers an’ sisters that seems dead sure of goin’.”

The members of the Society had all entered and taken their places, before the little group, consisting of Mrs. Thomas, Mrs. Landvetter, and Mrs. Nitschkan summoned courage to follow; but fairly inside, they could scarcely restrain their

astonishment at the sight which awaited them. In the center of the room was a large table piled high with bolts of flannel, muslin, prints, etc., while ribbons, tape, and thread overflowed them. At the head of the table stood Mrs. Evans, her face set, her eyes stern. With a slight bow to the Society, she opened the meeting.

“Ladies of the Aid Society, I wish to call the attention of the members of this organization to the goods here on the table. The Committee heard some of the spiteful things that’s been said about it, and following these remarks, we didn’t feel that we cared to put ourselves in a position where we’d have to put up with such criticism; so instead of buyin’ accordin’ to the list, we simply ordered the goods sent over here on approval, which is the latest, and what’s always done where folks is up-to-date an’ has any glimmerings of style about them. So, Ladies of the Aid Society, it’s up to you. There’s the goods, there’s your list,”—throwing it upon the table with a superb gesture. “You can select what you want. Mr. Hayman is here himself, over there in the corner, to measure things off, an’ he’s got his horse an’ wagon outside, to cart’ em back when you’re through with ‘em.

“An’ now, there’s just one last word I want to say, an’ it’s this:”—she paused effectively—“us ladies of the Committee has been a good deal hurt an’ cut up by the action of certain members of the Society. I shan’t mention no names, but I guess everybody knows who I mean. There was a good deal of ugly talk about us tryin’ to be elected on the Committee because we wanted to jant off to Mt. Tabor an’ do our own fall buyin’. Well, those of us that wasn’t hurt to the heart’s core was fightin’ mad, an’ if saner counsels hadn’t prevailed, there’d been a window or so broke on Sunshine Avenue. But the Committee held itself aloft an’ tried to do its duty in a humble way. Now, none of us wants to hurl stones, but we can’t help but feel that it’s up to certain sisters who are well known to us to apologize to the Committee that’s suffered this insult an’ done the best it could anyway.

“An’ furthermore, I wish to state that by goin’ to Mt. Tabor Saturday, Missioner —Miss Benson -secured a offer from Walt Garvin to paint the church within an’ without. That’s all.”

She resumed her seat with an air of wounded pride, hauteur, lofty scorn for her detractors, and dove-like forgiveness, ineffably blended.

“What I always been tellin’ you?” breathed Mrs. Nitschkan huskily in Mrs. Thomas’ ear. “Ain’t I always been right?”—digging her sharply in the side

—“Why, that woman, that little Effie Evans, no bigger than a minute, could give Gabriel pointers on how to toot his horn.”