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THE GOSSIPERS

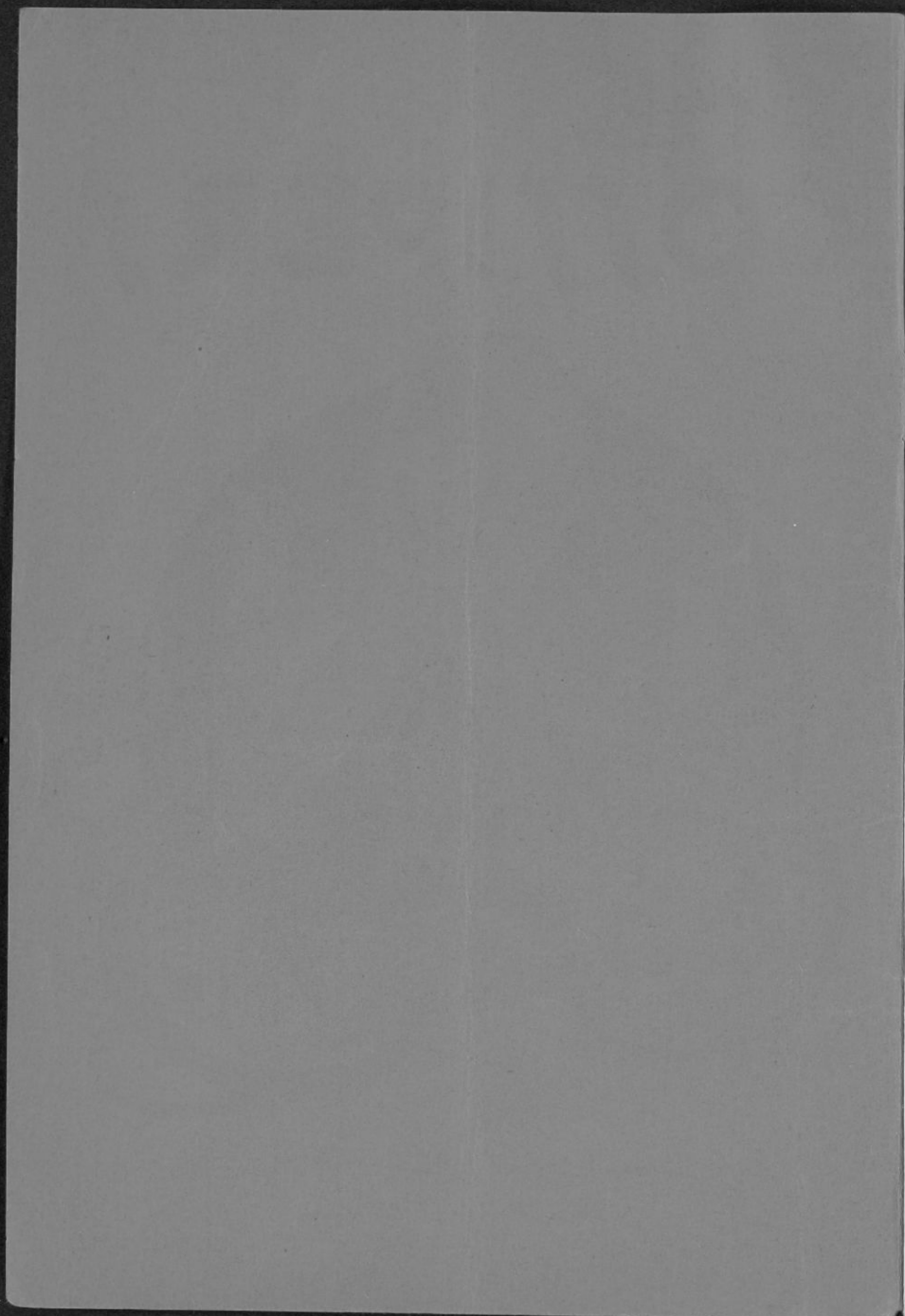


By CHARLES L. CUNNINGHAM

The Paulist Press

401 West 59th Street

New York, N. Y.



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MARIE L. CLINGMAN

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HE racketeers, gunmen and beer-barons of gangland have attained to such an apparently assured place in our national life, that we have grown accustomed to their rather violent *modus operandi*. Through the newspapers and magazines we are fairly well acquainted with their great chieftains, their open scorn of the law and the internal strife among them which periodically replaces dead leaders with live ones. We know that among the gangs promotion is not obtained by brains or by any other particular mental equipment, but rather by accurate marksmanship. The quicker the automatic speaks, the quicker the advancement to power and income. Yet, while we marvel at the ever increasing number of brutal murders, we are not so shocked as we would have been a generation ago. We are getting used to reading about murders, they are so common in this modern, civilized age. But what does make us shudder is the open disregard for the sacredness of human life. For a price, and a small price at that, any human life may be snuffed out. Certainly, conditions in the criminal life of America may well give serious-minded men much food for thought, because a powerful source of evil seems to have rooted itself firmly in the very heart of the nation.

There is, however, another species of evil, and it may well be called an evil, that is far more prevalent in modern life than murder. It is so silent and insidious in its methods that it is almost imperceptible; certainly, it is never written about in the newspapers. It is the evil of careless gossip. Surely, next to life itself, there is nothing more sacred to man than his good name, but the reputations ruined and the good names destroyed by common gossip are beyond computation.

We do not expect all men and women living in this busy, careless world to aspire to the pinnacles of sanctity. Far from it, but we surely have a right to expect of Christian men and women the ordinary, natural decency that would urge them to protect the good name of another. This natural decency, however, seems to be quite rare. Even those who have been taught the truth, who pride themselves upon their respectability; those who, to all appearances are good, practical Catholics in the true meaning of the word, seem to have entirely lost sight of the divine obligation which rests upon them, of guarding their tongue.

Too many of our otherwise excellent Catholic people are so intent upon observing what they consider the more important commandments, that they seem to forget all about the eighth. "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." There can be no distinction in importance between any of the commandments of God. Each of them binds us with equal gravity, and, in our own personal opinion, there can scarcely be any offense against the divine law that

is more devastating in its effects upon both the offender and the victim, than the sins of deliberate calumny, slander or detraction.

Simple Truths

Strangely enough, in spite of the almost universal facilities for instruction nowadays, many Catholics do not know the most simple truths of their faith. They may pride themselves upon being quite conversant with the topics of the day, but too many of them do not know what the sins of detraction or slander mean, but their vincible ignorance by no means mitigates the gravity of their sin or of their responsibility. Let me define them, from the Catholic Dictionary. "*Calumny*—commonly used to mean unjust damaging of another's character by imputing to him something of which he is not guilty." "*Detraction*—the unjust damaging of another's good name by the revelation of some fault or crime, of which that other is guilty, or thought to be guilty, by the defamer." "*Slander*—attributing to another in his absence a fault of which one knows him to be innocent." "Slander differs from detraction inasmuch as the former is the imputing of a misdeed never committed, while detraction reveals an actual but hidden fault."

Certainly, there is nothing puzzling or obscure about these definitions. They define certain sins that are forbidden by the eighth commandment and even the dullest must recognize the value God has placed upon the good name of our neighbor when He forbids such tampering with it as is defined above.

Our inner tribunal of conscience implanted in every soul by Almighty God, speaks clearly when we violate the divine law but, queerly enough, the same conscience which recognizes instantly the transgression of any other of the commandments, is strangely silent when the eighth is broken. For those whose "harmless gossip" has stifled or deadened their conscience, the above definitions should be perfectly clear.

It is hard to classify the gossipers specifically. They are found in every sphere of life under the sun, so we will leave the classification to the reader. In spite of the plain, clear teaching of the Church; in spite of all that has been written about watchfully guarding the tongue; in spite of countless sermons and instructions preached against uncharity of speech, it seems that the flood of detractions and slanders is never stemmed. The loose tongue is found everywhere, even in the sanctuary, but it must be said in all truth, that while the clerical gossip is not unknown, the clerical detractor or slanderer is almost unheard of. Wherever he exists, he is a rare species, unworthy of his sacred calling and we may safely leave him to his own uneasy conscience.

The General Gossiper

There is the general run of gossipers who talk about everything and everyone without the slightest regard for veracity or reputation. Some evil spirit seems to inspire within them an unholy urge for ceaseless and destructive gossip. Nothing is too holy,

no one is too sacred for their malicious tongues and they go through life wantonly planting the seeds of evil in the minds of their hearers. The Church, the spouse of Christ, her doctrines, her regulations and her methods are freely criticized by wagging tongues. The clergy, from the highest to the lowest, are pilloried and racked with careless abandon; their faults and failings are broadcast; their comings and goings are watched with speculative comment and seldom are they represented as they really are. The exaggerating tongue laid upon the priest's reputation can do more harm to the Church of Christ than an army of Atheists. Even the sanctified nun who goes serenely about her daily task of serving her God, far from the madding crowd, is not safe from the poisoned tip of the malicious tongue. If those who have consecrated their lives to God had to answer for all the sins of omission and commission attributed to them by the tireless tongue of gossip, an eternal purgatory would be far too short.

And bear in mind, dear Reader, that we are not referring to heathen gossipers in darkest Africa, or in any other unenlightened corner of the earth where God is but vaguely known, if known at all; nor do we speak of the enemies of the Church who are constantly striving to defame her. No; we are referring to Catholic people, whose souls have been illumined by the brilliant beacon light of divine Faith; Catholics who cannot be totally ignorant of the evil they do, of the reparation demanded of them and of the retribution which will surely be exacted from them when their little earthly day is ended and they stand

before the final tribunal of their eternal Judge, who Himself has told us all that one day we must account to Him for every idle word.

The Gossiping Lawyer

Let us consider some more specific gossipers; let us call them more prominent gossipers because of their prominence in life. We have in mind certain members of the legal profession, successful at the bar, brilliant in their achievements before the courts and prominent in their community who seem to have no conception of the inviolability of the secrets committed to them. Along with the rest of the common crowd, they are bound to respect the eighth commandment, apart from the fact that the ethics of their profession forbid them to disclose secrets of their clients. Without malicious intent perhaps, but none the less surely, the gossiping lawyer can do an untold amount of harm. Not long ago, I heard of a young attorney, a Catholic, unconcernedly rattling the bones of a client's closet to three or four of his friends. Upon being chided for revealing secrets of the litigants in question, he calmly remarked that the newspapers have destroyed all legal secrecy. Which answer doesn't promise any great success for this legal counsellor nor much security for his clients. Certainly the court has the right to know the facts, but all facts are not always published unless the case be notorious. The lawyer who reveals secrets of his client to private individuals may be guilty of a grave sin of detraction, for if what is revealed be gravely derogatory to the character of the client, the

sin of the detractor is grave, as it undoubtedly was in the case of the attorney cited above. A conscientious lawyer, and thank God there are many of them, will never reveal any secret of his client to his best friends, or even to his wife, through careless gossip, but will hold it inviolate, obedient both to the divine law and to the ethics of his profession.

Medical Gossipers

More common gossipers than the lawyers, however, are found among the members of the medical profession, the doctors. Perhaps they are more common because they have a larger clientele, or because their opportunities for gossip are multiplied. They go from one patient to another, gathering family history as they go, and altogether too frequently, they are prone to repeat what they have seen or heard in another patient's home. Again without malicious intent, they lay the foundation of embarrassing stories, which never lose, but always gain in importance and detail, by repetition. Or, it may not be to another patient that the story is told. At an evening's party, after a busy day, helped perhaps by a cocktail or two, the doctor may regale his friends with an interesting account of his peregrinations during the day, and wholly unconscious of any wrongdoing, he may reveal family affairs that should be kept to himself. Or, still worse, doctors seem to think that it is perfectly proper to tell their wives what ails Mrs. Jones or what confines Miss Smith to the house, or that Tom, Dick and Harry are not suffering from over-

work or a nervous breakdown, but were simply knocked out by too much bad booze. The doctor isn't conscious, perhaps, of doing any great harm to these patients of his, but when his wife leaves her next bridge party the club members are pretty well informed about the ailments of the community and much else besides. And while the bridge players listen eagerly to everything the doctor's wife has to say about Mrs. Jones or Miss Smith or Mr. Tom, and glean every possible bit of information from her, they mentally resolve that if they, or any member of their family be taken ill, they will not have their friend's husband as their doctor. They don't want their particular ailments proclaimed abroad. Many a doctor has lost many a good patient through a garrulous wife, but he shouldn't blame her. He should blame himself for not holding inviolate the professional secrets committed to him.

All doctors are not in this class; far from it. The majority of those with whom we have come in contact over many years, have been men who were thoroughly worthy of the confidence placed in them by their patients. But there are far too many Catholic doctors who take their responsibility and their obligations towards their patients in this matter far too lightly, and they may do irretrievable harm by their idle gossip. That they are reprehensible before God goes without saying. Their word regarding diseases of their patients, etc., carries a far greater weight than that of a layman and coming from one who speaks with authority, does a correspondingly greater harm. Doctors can never be too careful in their

speech, both for the good of their patients and for the good of their own souls.

Dental Gossiper

The garrulous dentist, no less than the doctor, has an almost unlimited field for gossip. His patients must be amused; and their minds distracted from themselves. Laboring under a high nervous tension as they are, accentuated by the dread of a painful dental operation, the dentist feels that he must divert their thoughts and what is better for mental relief than plenty of neighborly gossip, especially for the doctor whose fingers are more nimble than his wits! The more intelligent will perhaps find many subjects of conversational interest to his patient, varying the topic to suit the individual, but for many, gossip is the old, reliable and ever ready mainstay. There is a Catholic dentist, well known in his community, who is an adept at murdering reputations while he fills a cavity. He seems to take an unholy delight in retailing the latest bit of juicy gossip or scandal, giving every detail with an easy facility that bespeaks long practice. Woe to the patient who profers any items of interest concerning the latest scandal, for he, or she, is sure to be quoted to the next occupant of the chair. No man's reputation is sacred to this professional, whether he be prince or prelate, and yet, he poses as a good Catholic. He seems to think that his patients like this kind of evil chatter. Undoubtedly there are some dusty minds which do revel in such gossip; unable to raise their souls more than six feet above the earth, these minds apparently

are unable to grasp anything higher or more elevating. But the great majority of our men and women detest the oily scandal-monger, and if this particular dentist knew how many dollars his glib, evil tongue has cost him, he might begin to learn to fear his tongue more than, at present, at least, he seems to fear his God. Whether or not he be cognizant of the fact, to date, his tongue has hurt him a great deal, financially, with his patients. It may hurt him eternally, with his God. The dentist has a broad field for gossip spread before him. One would think that even if his conscience has lost its delicacy, he would be too deeply concerned about his practice to engage in idle gossip with his patients.

The Cynical Male

Far more than the professional gossipper is the cynical male, whose exalted ego prompts him to criticize, and condemn indiscriminately, anything or anybody who doesn't suit his peculiar fancy or agree with his own distorted ideas. He is generally, though not always, an ignorant person who looks out upon the world through jaundiced eyes. He sees himself as a rather superior person in his own domain, as ignorant people are wont to do, and the milk of human kindness has long since soured in his misanthropic heart. No one is above this man's gossiping tongue; nothing too sacred for his profaning criticism, not even the commandments of God or the Church. He confidently pronounces his solemn judgments upon them all and only the fool would waste his time trying to correct him.

But if such a specimen of humanity be the Catholic father of children and pours his mildewed criticisms and judgments into their innocent ears, then indeed, it is pitiful as well as deplorable. Unable to distinguish between the truth and the irrational ravings of their gossiping sire, the seeds of doubt and unbelief are sown in their receptive young hearts, and they grow up like their father, ever critical in their judgments, loose with their tongue, unable to see good in anything or anybody. It is one of the tragedies of life to see a blatant father such as this, searing those youthful souls which he is bound to nourish into eternity and yet, there is nothing that can be done about it. We can only hope that the mother's character is strong enough to counterbalance the blighting influence of her husband's evil tongue and to pray that Almighty God will be more merciful to him in eternity, than his children will probably be in later life.

The Superior Gossiper

While the instances cited above reveal to us, to some degree, the male gossiper at his worst, we have not the hardihood to place him upon the same plane with his sister, the female gossiper. Man's work and mode of life is vastly different from woman's. His ideas are different, his mental activities are centered in different fields, and his social and political activities divert his mind into other channels. While the gossiping male is altogether too prevalent, yet, we feel that the common consensus of opinion will agree with us in saying that he is not in the same class with

the female; as regards gossip she is far above him, vastly his superior.

For some reason or other the tongue seems to function more fluently and bitterly in the woman's world. It has a garrulity and an acerbity that seems to be less common or less natural to the man. While it is an acknowledged fact that the sterner sex is not entirely free from gossiping, yet it cannot be denied that the majority of women are almost addicts to this harmful pastime, that may be so ruinous in its effects and which is almost always sinful.

The woman gossipier recognizes no law, civil or divine; no fear, temporal or eternal, and when the opportunity arises she is never slow in discussing the faults and failings of others. She will relate, with remarkable accuracy of detail, the latest scandal she has heard and it matters not who the unfortunate victim may be. With infinite care and precision she will expose the skeletons in the cupboards of her friends and acquaintances as well as the skeletons in the closets of her enemies, without ever adverting to the fact that it is wrong and injurious, and at times gravely sinful.

The womanly reserve about which we hear so much and see so little is instantly forgotten when the question of another's shortcomings is brought up. Criticism of others seems to be the main purpose in life of many women, and they take a peculiar delight in trying to lower others in the estimation of their hearers. It is a pitiful bit of meanness, apart from its uncharity, to besmirch another's fair name, one who, perhaps, has never done the slightest bit of

harm to the gossip, or, who may even have befriended and defended her, but women, apparently, are merciless. We all know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that such gossip is common among our Catholic women, who have been taught from childhood to be generous in speech.

One can generally obtain a very fair portrayal of a woman's character from her conversation. Her true nobility of soul or the tender charity of her heart is instantly revealed by her silence or her protest, when a back-biting neighbor lays down her barrage of destructive criticism. And, on the other hand, the smallness of her mind and the weakness of her soul immediately becomes apparent from the avidity with which she seizes upon a choice morsel of scandal and overworks her active tongue in amplifying and exaggerating the woeful tale she has heard.

The real woman is always beyond and above such cheap gossip which succeeds only in causing harm to another, stifles her own conscience and weakens her character. If a woman possesses that real self-respect which the true woman will always have, a quality which ever dignifies and ennobles womanhood, she will never demean herself by indulging in any kind of cheap gossip about others. She will be so busy about her own concerns, too busy strengthening and upbuilding her own spiritual edifice that she will never have the time to waste on the petty concerns of another. Common gossipers can be found in any backyard but real women are rare. And too, women are naturally very sensitive to other women's criticisms. Why, when they themselves are so easily

offended, do they not think of the needless pain they cause to others by the careless use of their tongue?

The Busy Housewife

Some women gossipers are of the insipid, brainless type. They can find nothing in life so attractive as gabbing about someone else, and it becomes so natural to them that it is almost impossible for them to correct or eradicate the habit. They have become so accustomed to vain and useless gossip that they are unable to appreciate the real charm of a refined conversation and their idea of a perfectly good time is just plain gossip, and the cheaper and more racy it is, the better. The favorite indoor sport of an overwhelming number of women is unrestrained gossip. They simply revel in rehashing a delightful bit of "news" about their next-door neighbor, and the temptation to indulge in critical small talk seems beyond their power to resist. Married women seem to be particularly afflicted with this mania for idle chatter, a chatter which would be laughable were not its evil results so grave and so far-reaching. With her mind chiefly occupied with her household and her children, a little bit of fresh gossip appeals to the housewife as something very refreshing. She quickly forgets all the pains and aches which her burdensome household duties produce, forgets that little Johnny has just run out through the back gate, forgets everything when an excited neighbor bustles in to ask her if she has heard of Mrs. So and So. In breathless haste she lays aside her broom or dust cloth, as the gossiping neighbor comfortably parked alongside the

kitchen table, reveals all the spicy details which she has just learned from the insurance agent or the ice man.

Even the arrival of the grocer's boy or the laundryman fails to interrupt this judicial court which calmly proceeds to destroy what little bit of reputation Mrs. So and So has left. Family histories are painstakingly gone into, in detail, and with an unerring accuracy, which they seldom display in anything else, these "busy" housewives are able to discover and lay bare every known fault and failing of their unfortunate neighbor, and a good many more which proceed from their fertile brains with wonderful ease and facility. Eventually, many of the neighbors are found to be affiliated with their crucified victim in most of her shortcomings, and the kitchen conference, like the running brook, might go on forever if a sudden glance at the clock did not precipitate the hasty exit of the newsbearer, and a frantic rush of both for their respective pantries and gas stoves to get dinner ready. Both of them have solemnly agreed that Mrs. So and So ought to be drawn and quartered, despite the fact that each of them may be destroying each other, in the very same way, the next day. Add to this the undoubted fact that the gruesome news will soon be broadcast throughout the neighborhood, to the utter destruction of the last vestige or shred of reputation which Mrs. So and So ever had, and then compute if you can the woeful results of this morning session of "harmless" kitchen gossip.

What pleasure such apparently good women can

find in trying so hard to stain, besmirch or ruin the good name of another, will always remain an inexplicable mystery. Placing themselves upon an exalted plane, as those without stain and competent to judge, they do not hesitate to ruin another with their malicious, contemptible gossip. Were their own faults exposed to the clear light of day, in all probability those whom they condemn might look like archangels by comparison.

Nor are these loose-tongued women wise in their generation. If they were they would at least refrain from discussing their neighbors character in the presence of their little children, who quietly absorb what they hear, often repeat it to the confusion of their uncharitable mothers and grow up in absolute ignorance of the existence of the beautiful virtue of charity. They forget that the scandal monger is wielding a two-edged sword. What injures a talker's neighbor injures herself, and in due time payment will be exacted.

Such gossip in the woman's world is by no means confined to the kitchen. We might mention the school teachers' gossiping revels in their moments of recreation. We would think that our Catholic school teachers would be above "picking" bits of family history from little Mary or Johnny, and retailing the information thus gleaned from the innocents, but this petty trait seems to be more common than we like to believe. We might think, too, that our Catholic telephone operators would be more faithful to their conscience and to the rules of their company, than to listen in on private conversations and repeat what

they hear. This is quite on a par with that other contemptible business of opening or reading another's letters. Unfortunately, time and experience have proved that there are so many operators who are so devoid of simple decency and conscientiousness that no sensible man will mention anything over the phone that he wants kept secret. Operators frequently repeat what they hear over the wire, thinking it a great joke on those concerned. But it is none of their business and very often their unguarded gossip is no joke, but does an incalculable amount of harm.

Catholic servants who gossip about their employers seem to think that they have a legitimate right to repeat what they see and hear in homes where they are employed. Servants' gossip has ruined the reputation and good name of many a good man and good woman. Yet, when the servant pays the just penalty for her gossiping in a well-merited discharge, her simple gossip becomes bitter invective.

The Bridge Party

Another most prolific source of gossip that has rapidly developed in these latter days is—the bridge party. Man's inventive genius has abolished most of the drudgery of other days, a drudgery which brought the lines to mother's face and the silvery strand to her hair at an earlier age. The electric washer, electric iron, the frigidaire, the vacuum cleaner and other labor-saving devices have shortened her working day and given her much more spare time than in days gone by, hence the Bridge Club. The afternoon

bridge is frequently, and we feel that it would not be amiss to say, generally, the occasion for a more "refined" session of gossip, back-biting and slander. The gin "orange-blossoms" which have become almost indispensable accessories to the modern card party may or may not give an added stimulus to the conversation, but at any rate woman's besetting sin is always in evidence. It may be an absent member who is "put on the pan" for the verbal roasting. It doesn't matter in the least that the week before she was the wit of the party, flattered and applauded to the skies. She is absent today, however, and her "friends" proceed to dissect her character, or her husband's, as the case may be, and by the time the first hand or two is over there isn't much left of her. Her character is deftly skewered, dismembered and cut into very small pieces, and when each member arrives home after their "successful" afternoon bridge, she begins the process of disseminating the glad news by telling her husband all that she heard about her absent "friend."

Or perhaps the hostess of last week's gathering is laid upon the table to be operated upon, and you may be sure it will be a skillful operation. The atrocious taste displayed in the furnishings of her home, the miserable prizes she gave, the scanty refreshments she served, and even the clothes she wore provide plenty of carrion for the crows as the game progresses, as with unrestrained freedom they proceed to pick her bones clean. Yet, if the subject of their dissecting tongues were to walk in on them in the very midst of their operation, she would be wel-

came with cheerful smiles and honeyed greetings as if no guest could be more welcome.

It would take a far keener and more analytical mind than this writer possesses, or ever hopes to possess, to discover and explain the psychological process in woman by which she can cold-bloodedly tear her "friend's" reputation to pieces in one moment and greet her with a charming smile the next, with perhaps an affectionate kiss thrown in. It is hard for an ordinary mortal to understand that. Yet, after all, we wonder who is fooled the most! Women may fool men, but they can't fool women.

The great pity of it all is that many of these women who would be insulted if they were told they were not ladies (which they are not in the true sense of the word), have been educated in Catholic schools, Catholic academies and colleges. They have been well instructed in the grievous sinfulness of sins of detraction and slander, and taught, by example as well as by word, to respect the character and good name of another, to emulate the kindly charity of speech of the lowly Galilean and to strive to bring out in their lives the image of Him whose generosity of heart burns on almost every page of the Gospel story. For these Catholic women St. Paul wrote in vain to the Corinthians when he said: "If I speak with the tongue of men and angels, and have not charity, I am as sounding brass and tinkling cymbal."

The Pious Gossiper

And there is a still worse type of the Catholic woman gossiper who, unfortunately, we must admit,

lives and moves amongst us. She is the pseudo-pious gossip, who so frequently visits the church, attends all religious exercises, and to all appearances is an exemplary, fervent Catholic. She is a lineal descendant of the Pharisees of old, who were so zealous in the observance of the outward forms of the law that they forgot all about the law itself. They were prone to keep the outside of their cup scrupulously clean, but allowed the dirt to accumulate quite freely within.

These so-called pious gossipers are apparently shocked at any dereliction of their neighbor. At the slightest fall from grace they lift up their hands in pious horror, their shocked faces visibly portraying the deep wounds inflicted upon their pious souls. Were they content with this manifestation of their spiritual anguish and humbly prayed for the spiritual well-being of the unfortunate delinquent, we might believe that their piety was the genuine article. But they are not content with this. Their way of helping the fallen sinner is to pour the sad news into every sympathetic ear, more piously perhaps, than the well-known fishwife, but none the less emphatically, none the less harmfully. Like the common enemy of us all, the pious gossip goes about under the guise of an angel of light, piously sowing her seeds of evil.

"Pious" hypocrites such as these, and they are not uncommon, are a discredit to their faith, for there is little true faith in them. They wear their religion on their faces, but it stops there. There can be no true religion without charity, and true Christian Charity

scorns to reveal another's fault, unless it be a case of absolute necessity or duty. The pious gossip, who, under the appearance of deep solicitude for her neighbor or her church reveals another's actual or supposed faults, is a perfect replica of the ancient Pharisee whom the gentle Christ so bitterly condemned in those distant ages of the past.

Women of this type deceive only themselves, but they do an immense amount of harm to their religion. The Lord Himself knows that the Church has enough to do to contend with the "pious fools" within her fold, those who believe and practice their faith honestly and earnestly enough, but whose ignorance of what they practice is so evident, that it is no wonder that non-Catholics sometimes accuse us of superstitious practices. But the pious gossip is far worse and her "pious" tongue is just as poisonous as was the serpents in the Garden of Eden.

It is quite amusing to listen to the flimsy, childish excuses which these otherwise good people will offer, when they are chided for indulging in their "harmless" gossip, which as a matter of fact may be very harmful and sinful as well. We have often heard people say: "Oh, we don't talk about anyone with an evil intention; we just want something to talk about; just for fun."

Isn't it queer, that with such a boundless wealth of ideas for conversation to be had for the choosing, sensible, Catholic men and women must needs speak of another's character, and speak evilly at that? Can they never find time to discuss the noblest subject that can ever concern the mind of man,—God, His

everlasting Church and her divine mission among men? Do they never have a thought of their immortal soul and its earthly pilgrimage on its way to eternity? Are they blind to the dazzling phenomena of nature and her indescribable beauty which so eloquently speaks to them of a bountiful God from dawn to dusk? And the utter stupidity of talking about another "just for fun." If these people rammed their neighbor's car and ruined it, would they excuse themselves by saying that they did it just for fun? It is easy enough to repair a damaged car or buy a new one, but all the wealth in the world can't repair or buy back a good name, once it has been destroyed by malicious gossip.

Weak Excuses

Another common excuse is: "Oh, everybody does it; everybody talks about others." Apart from the gratuitous inanity of this excuse, it is false in principle. It may be true that there are a vast number of detractors in the world, but that fact doesn't condone or repair a single detraction. Because there are thousands of thieves in the world is no license for one individual to steal. I wonder what a judge in our criminal courts would say to a thief who defended himself with the plea that there are many other thieves? He would probably say, "well, we will have one less now," as he pronounced sentence. The fallacy of such an excuse is evident even to the dullest.

"We have only said what was true; we haven't told lies about anyone," is the commonest excuse of all and the least excusable. Surely we are bound, al-

ways, to refrain from telling lies, but even if a person has erred grievously, he still possesses his good name, if his error, or fault be unknown and no one has the right to take that good name away from him by making that mistake known, no matter what he has done. It is not within our province to judge, or pronounce judgment upon another for his mistakes. That belongs to God.

Gossipers never seem to realize the untold harm they may do by their careless speech. It is true that their intent may not be malicious; it may even be innocent enough. They may not deliberately set out to destroy another's reputation, but the simplest remark may be translated into something enormous in the retelling and without being aware of it, the gossipier has ruined a good name.

Insinuation

There are many different kinds of gossipiers, but of all the mean, contemptible reputation wreckers we have ever known, the most artful and most successful is the innuendo person, that miserable parody of a man or woman, who sows the seeds of discord by malicious hints. The plain, out and out calumniator or slanderer is bad enough, but at least he leaves a loophole; his lie may find him out some day and force him to retract his calumny or slander. Not so, however, with the oily insinuator. He craftily avoids any specific accusation, just throws out vague, uncertain hints, strong and pointed enough to wreck a reputation, but not sufficiently clear to trap the wrecker.

He has no conception of charity at all, and his veracity is of the shifting variety that is variable enough to suit his own peculiar fancy.

Unfortunately, there are too many of this tricky species in every community. "I hear," and "they say," the father and mother of all lies, and "everybody is talking about him," are always part of their stock in trade and without the least concern about the morality of what they are doing, they proceed with their malicious innuendoes to tear another's reputation to shreds. "He is a good fellow, but,"—or "she is a fine woman, but"; oh, that little malicious "but" has ruined many a friendship and befouled many a fair name. Where so much good is said of a person and then that little "but" is uttered with a regretful sigh, it sounds like real, charitable pity for a good fellow gone wrong, but in reality it is only bedecking and decorating the victim for the sacrifice.

We can conceive of no person more despicable or contemptible in life than the man or woman who uses the good name of another as a stepping stone for their own preferment or advancement. And we can find no other solid reason for so besmirching a character, unless it be downright viciousness, which sets out deliberately to ruin another. Revealing faults or failings can certainly serve no good purpose. Certainly it doesn't help the person whose faults are revealed; it doesn't help the hearer in any way and with equal certainty, we know that it doesn't help the detractor, but rather injures him. The only sound reason possible is that the detractor may think that by belittling another, he may raise himself one jot or tittle in the

estimation of his hearers. Such a one may fool himself; he doesn't fool anyone else.

Sometimes, without intending it, without any malice at all, we may unwittingly harm another's reputation. But, at least, it was not deliberate, we try to make amends, and it teaches us, perhaps, to be more careful in our speech. But for the innuendo man or woman there should be no mercy or consideration. Such men and women and there are many of the breed are abominable, and though they may dress nicely, move among the socially elect and greet us with a charming smile, we should not forget how mean and miserable they are and treat them accordingly.

An Easy Job

St. James spoke more truthfully than perhaps he knew when he wrote that "the tongue is full of deadly poison." It is so easy, by a simple word, carelessly spoken, to do such grave harm. One of the easiest jobs in the world is that of faultfinding. And there are thousands of people working at that job every day in the year, nor do they ever complain because there is no pay attached to it. It takes an effort to accomplish something worth while in life, but faultfinding can be done very easily, without any effort at all. An apt illustration is found in this homely story which we picked up somewhere. "A dog, hitched to a lawnmower, stopped to bark at a passerby." The boy who was guiding the lawnmower said to him: "Oh, don't mind the dog, he is just barking for an excuse to rest. It's easier for him to bark than it is to pull this lawnmower."

And so it is in life. It is far easier for a man or woman to be critical than correct or charitable; it is easier to hinder than to help, easier to destroy a reputation than to help build a character. Any "dumb-bell," if we may use the word, can grumble, criticize or censure, but it takes a real man or woman to mind their own business and keep on working faithfully at a constructive task.

How easy it is to pronounce a judgment—and how hard, at times, to undo its effects! How quickly does a judgment roll from the tongue, even when the speaker has no knowledge of the facts! Yet these judges in Israel are found everywhere who never hesitate for a moment to pronounce judgment on prince, prelate and people. How often do men and women judge unjustly when they judge harshly? They can't always know just what has caused the act or temper of another whom they condemn. It may have arisen in some mental struggle, some hurt that has pierced a sensitive soul, or in the silent endurance of some unspoken pain. The mere surface of the character may be exposed but of the complexity of emotions surging within, these self-appointed judges cannot have the slightest idea. It is absolutely impossible to know fully the conditions and circumstances behind the act of another which they condemn. Surely, when we are so sensitive to judgments passed upon ourselves, we should learn to temper our own judgment upon others, with kindness and charity.

Very few, if any, of us mortals ever receive our just deserts here on earth. We will be over-praised, or over-

censured, no matter what we do, but very seldom are we correctly appraised at our proper value. Men and women, as the world sees them, may be vastly different human beings from what they really are. More than one depraved soul is concealed beneath an angelic face, and the man who is an angel on the street may be a devil at home. There is much truth in that old saying that "no man is a hero to his valet." So many elements enter into a judgment that we cannot be too careful in judging, if we judge at all. Love or hatred, passion or prejudice are usually too strong to admit of a clear, impartial judgment. These factors are generally much stronger than truth or justice. If it be a friend who is under discussion we are prone to blind ourselves to his faults and see only the good in him; we are only too ready to find excuses for his most glaring defects. If it be an enemy, then our judgments will be just the reverse. We blind ourselves to his good qualities and are only too glad to see the evil in him.

So long, then, as we maintain two standards of judgment, one for our friends and another for our enemies; so long as we are content with shallow and superficial judgments, just so long will men fail to get the proper judgment they deserve. Human judgments are ever susceptible to error. The world at large, as well as its jails, are filled with victims of circumstantial evidence and very few men or women are ever correctly labeled. The modern gangster may appear and live like a respectable millionaire, and the rich man may live modestly and plainly, giving no outward indication of his wealth. Grand-

mothers dress like school girls and mothers can hardly be told from their daughters. The world overlooks or ignores its heroes while they are living and erects costly monuments to them when they are dead; it clasps fawning hypocrites to its bosom only to find later that it has been harboring a snake. Yes, it's hard to make a sure judgment and hasty judgments are very often proved to be wrong.

This is bound to happen now and then. When one is honest at heart it is hard to discover instantly the true character of the sleek knave with the oily tongue; it is hard to discover the rogue in the apparently honest man; it is hard to believe evil of a man whom we were convinced was good. And yet, haven't we all known some whom we were sure were straight, only to learn afterwards, to our sorrow, that they were crooked?

No one can be blamed for the fallibility of his judgments; they must necessarily be faulty unless he has correct data upon which to base his judgment, and, ordinarily that is impossible. But our very liability to err should warn us to be ever careful, and less eager, to pronounce our judgment upon others. Some, of necessity, by virtue of their station, must pass judgment upon others, but with most of us, it is purely gratuitous, neither asked nor needed, and we may greatly help both ourselves and our neighbors by silence. Don't judge everyone by what you hear; if you must judge, wait until you know. And for the loose-tongued incompetent there is no saving grace at all.

These thoughts on uncharity of speech are writ-

ten down with all due respect and admiration for the multitudes of faithful Catholic lawyers and doctors, for Catholic men and women who guard well their tongue, who love their neighbor as themselves and respect his reputation as they respect their own and who are a credit and consolation to their Church. They are written primarily for those Catholics who are careless in their speech, and to remind them of the seriousness of "harmless" gossip, in the hope of abating, even in the smallest degree, this widespread evil among our people. For their temporal well being we would recall to their minds these lines of Pope: "Speak clearly if you speak at all; carve every word before you let it fall." And for the good of their soul we would remind them of what St. Peter says in his first epistle: "For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips, that they speak no guile."

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