OR a gentleman of such dignity and deliberateness, Professor Chilson disposed of his dessert with an almost unseemly haste. It was a dessert that he particularly liked. Tonight, however, he did not remark on his luxurious helping of the delicately sweetened dainty, he merely ate—I had almost said gobbled—it, and flinging down his napkin, pushed back his chair and looked across the table at his wife, expectantly. That lady was smilingly ready and arose at once, thus freeing him from his unwilling detention at the table. Though she had been his bride so short a time, Mrs. Chilson already knew it was wise to eschew conversation and cut the dessert short one night each month, namely, on the night when there was a new *Atlantic*.

It was a purely acquired courtesy which halted Professor Chilson's eager steps at the dining-room doorway to permit his new wife, in her softly clinging gown, to precede him into the living room beyond. His natural instinct had been all to leap nimbly past her, or over her, to swoop and pounce upon the delicious feast in black and white, which lay so invitingly beside the reading lamp.

It was fully half an hour before Professor Chilson, sunk in the depths of his easy chair, even spoke. Then he said, "By Jupiter, I don't see how he does it! This Worthington Fillmore chap—month after month—you know, each one a little masterpiece!"

Professor Chilson's pleased eyes still dwelt on the page he had just finished. Receiving no reply, however, from his usually responsive wife, he looked up and was astounded at the appearance of that lady.

With the evening paper fallen on the floor beside her, Mrs. Chilson sat with her hands tensely locked; her unhappy eyes gazed into space, as though held by some invisible hypnotist.

At the sound of his voice however she seemed to come out of her wretched trance. Her slight body trembled visibly.

Professor Chilson carefully laid down the *Atlantic*, got up and came toward his wife.

"Elizabeth—what is it?" he asked earnestly, standing in awkward helplessness beside her.

"Nothing—nothing at all, I assure you," returned his wife, uncovering her face and sitting up briskly, as though to shake off her oppression.

"Have—have I done anything?" The phrase was uttered a bit stiffly. Professor Chilson was not naturally of an apologetic temperament. But every married person learns that formula sooner or
later. No doubt Professor Chilson would have learned it sooner had he married a young girl instead of an experienced widow.

“Oh, no, indeed, Irving! You are never anything but considerate. It is nothing, really.”

“Then,” announced Professor Chilson, releasing her hand abruptly, “then you are regretting our marriage.” He gazed at her reproachfully.

“Oh, Irving, how can you say such a thing!” she cried.

“What else is there to say—or think?” he asked gloomily.

“Well then, it was something I read in the evening paper.”

He caught it up and hastily rescanned the columns he had read earlier in the evening. Two automobile victims and an unknown suicide seemed to be the only plausible excuses for Mrs. Chilson’s emotion. He questioned her.

“No. Please don’t think any more about it,” she begged.

“But I do think about it. I insist upon an explanation, Elizabeth,” returned her husband obstinately. He suddenly found his masterful rôle very pleasant. He had been so excessively mild for fifty years that the sight of this delicate creature actually shrinking and pleading and tremulous before him made something of a bully of him.

“You must show me the paragraph,” he went on, pleasantly. He sat down again, spread the paper on her lap, took her passive hand once more.

“Now I’ll point down each column, and you’ll tell me when we come to the right one.”

Suddenly, as they neared the bottom of a column on the third page, she uttered a little moan and snatched her hand away.

“Aha!” cried Professor Chilson melodramatically, and read aloud as though to a large and interested audience:

“The Governor today refused to commute the death sentence or to grant a reprieve to Otto Muller, the murderer. Accordingly the man will die on Friday morning, the seventeenth, the date first set for the execution.”

“Good Heavens, Elizabeth, can it be possible that that man was—is—that you know him—” gasped Professor Chilson, staring at his wife, who sat huddled miserably in her chair with shamed, bowed head.

“Oh, no, I never heard of him until the trial last winter. I was abroad at the time of the murder itself. That was in August. I came home in October just in time for the trial.”

“But—why, good Heavens, Elizabeth—I don’t understand! You say you never heard of him until the trial. If he was nothing to you—no acquaintance even—as of course he couldn’t be—I don’t see why you even read about the ghastly thing.”

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"I couldn’t help it," she said simply. "I never can. I never could."

She sat twisting the new wedding ring on her delicate hand. She looked frightened, like a little naughty child detected. She had never looked so young to him before. He got up and strode about the pretty room in great perturbation. Finally he came and sat down beside her again, took her hand, and said:

"Elizabeth, I wish you’d tell me all about it. Do you like crimes? Do you like reading such things?"

"I don’t know," she replied honestly. "I don’t see how I can—but I read every word. I always have. I was a little girl, only twelve, the first time I ever heard about a crime. We were at a summer resort and one day, on the piazza, while I was sitting on the steps waiting for some other children to come down, I overheard some ladies discussing a dreadful murder case. Oh, I can’t ever forget it! I watched until they went for a walk, and then got the paper and read every word. It was a woman, who lived in a big house all alone—Oh—I can remember every sickening detail yet. It cast a blight, a real blight, over my childhood. I never was a child after that! I was just a little morbid thing, lurking about, greedily searching the newspapers for more gruesome stories of crime. The mere reading of them wasn’t the worst. It was going over and over and over them, in imagination. I couldn’t tell anyone, of course. I was as ashamed then as I am now, Irving, but I couldn’t help it. The criminal cases simply fascinate me. I read every word, and then I live it all through again. Sometimes I am the victim—sometimes the murderer—sometimes merely a helpless onlooker—but for days I just live through the horrors of the whole thing. I had got over this dreadful Muller affair—oh, of course I remember every detail of it—but I had put it out of my mind—and then tonight there was the reminder of it in the paper. For half an hour I’ve been a condemned man, brooding in a cell, remembering things—and waiting! I’ve heard the guards come for me, I’ve been led into the room where the chair is—I’ve sat while they fastened me in with straps—oh, Irving!" She broke off, sobbing weakly.

"Upon my word, Elizabeth, this is most extraordinary! I declare I can’t understand it!"

"I didn’t suppose you could," she said, humbly. "Though I’ve often wondered," she added, with a faint show of spirit, "if lots of people, nice, cultivated, proper people, don’t read those dreadful things just as avidly as I do. Only of course they’re ashamed to confess it."

"Oh, I don’t think so, Elizabeth!" her husband assured her. "It seems most abnormal, your passion for such things. I am very sorry
to hear of such a weakness in you. It’s—it’s unwholesome, Elizabeth, really it is. It’s a waste of emotion and of vitality. Now if I were going to let my imagination run away with me, I should try to depict the condition of the poor and needy, let us say, which would excite in me thoughts of pity and sympathy. Why don’t you think of this creature’s wife and children—I suppose he had them?”

“Yes, sir,” she returned dismally. “I’ve thought of them, too.”

“That’s good,” cried Professor Chilson briskly. “That’s more wholesome for you. You must make an effort to keep on thinking of them. The woman, now, will have the whole support of the family on her shoulders. That will require a great deal of effort and patient endurance and no doubt self-sacrifice. It will develop her character, however. Effort and sacrifice always develop people, Elizabeth. If you must think about anyone of the family, think about the woman. But you must exert your will, my dear.”

“I’ll try, Irving,” said Mrs. Chilson with agreeable meekness. “You’re quite right. It’s dreadfully unwholesome. It quite upsets me. I’ll try to think of something else, or, as you suggest, of the wife.”

She did make conscientious attempts to turn her thoughts into happier channels. It would have seemed pathetic, to anyone watching her, to see her desperate attempts. She put away the newspaper with its grim reminding paragraph. She went to her little desk in the corner and fussed over her household accounts. This proved almost a diversion, being so new and difficult. But suddenly, in the midst of an absorbing sum paid out for sweet-breads and grape-fruit and Brussels sprouts, she paused with pen in air, wondering painfully if a man could eat a breakfast half an hour before—

She went to bed at length, leaving her husband blissfully buried in the Atlantic, and obtained sleep, poor lady, at the price of a sleeping powder, which had more than once been required to free her from her torturing imagination.

She awoke in the gray dawn, however, and spent a dreadful two hours before it was time to get up. She tried heroically to follow her husband’s advice—not to remember that tomorrow morning, at daybreak—to think only of the wife. But her thoughts wouldn’t shape themselves as Irving had intended. She saw—she became—a woman huddling with six frightened children in a poor, shabby room, a woman convulsed with grief, sobbing, moaning, watching the clock with agonized eyes, awaiting the hour of her husband’s doom.

At breakfast Professor Chilson was aggressively cheerful and talkative, though his wife was certain that he must notice her wan looks. Both elaborately avoided any mention of their last night’s conversa-
tion. The Professor enthusiastically recommended three or four articles in the new magazine, impressively bade her have a happy day, pecked her pale cheek in dutiful conjugal farewell and departed fussily for his classes, his green felt bag of books under his arm.

Left alone, Mrs. Chilson went out to do her marketing, over to Riverside to watch the children who came to play in the park.

It was a very sweet, springy morning; a cool clean breeze blew in from the river, and the sunshine was warmly comforting; robins were saucily in evidence, and children romped everywhere. She had quite lost herself in the pretty antics of a pair of rosy babies, flirting from neighboring perambulators, when one of the nursemaids, sitting on the next bench to hers, remarked to the other:

“Well, ole Muller gits his tomorrer, don’t ’e? I wouldn’t like to be ’im today.”

“Me neither,” agreed her friend. “I was up to m’ aunt’s Sunday, ’n’ she knows a woman ’at used t’ know his wife. Sez she’s an awful nice woman, too. My lands, looky at my kid! Ain’t she gittin’ strong? She’d’a clumb right out if I wasn’t watchin’. Sit down, there, now, an’ watch the pretty horsies. Come on, Ada, let’s walk. They set still better if we ride ’em, I guess. I betcha ole Muller’s scared stiff ’bout now, don’ chu?”

They passed on, leaving Mrs. Chilson alone with an agonizing pity for the murderer’s wife—the “awful nice woman” to whom this gentle spring day must be the most hideous mockery. How did women live through such times?

It was not like Mrs. Chilson to do anything unconventional. But so long and so acute had this vicarious suffering been that she felt a little wild and desperate and defiant when she finally reached her determination. She hurried back to Broadway, sought a drugstore telephone booth. It was like her morbid memory to know the firm that had defended Muller. She found their number, and from them obtained the address where the condemned man’s wife was janitress. It was a place far up in the Bronx.

The trip in the subway seemed endless and stifling, after the sweet, fresh air of the park. After a while the train emerged from the dusky subway into the vivid spring sunshine and crashed along on an elevated track, from which she could look across great stretches of monotonous apartment houses, with many vacant lots between, and here and there a shabby old mansion with its grounds sadly encroached upon and relentless “flats” advancing upon all sides.

Mrs. Chilson had never called upon a janitress before. She wasn’t quite sure of the etiquette of this visit. She knew vaguely that apartment-house basements held boilers and dumb-waiter shafts and store-
rooms, but she felt great hesitancy in venturing down to find someone. So she stood before the house, with an increasing nervousness, wondering what to do, until two children whirled around the corner and dashed up against the area railing with shouts of delight. The little girl, whose rosy laughing face quite diverted attention from her very clean, faded, shabby, outgrown clothes, was learning to “roller-skate.” The little boy was trying to hold her up, running alongside. He was lame, but he ran very well for a lame boy. The little girl, having recovered her breath somewhat, was eager for another try.

“You leave me go, once,” she urged, clinging to the iron railing against which the boy leaned. “I bet I kin go it alone. Don’t you touch me, now!” She struck out boldly, executed a few wild motions with arms and legs, and sprawled headlong at Mrs. Chilson’s feet. That lady, assisted by the little boy, who came limping to the rescue, set the child once more upright and towed her back to the iron railing. She rubbed her bruises and giggled and blushed. The boy said, seriously, “I bin tellin’ her all the time she hadn’t ought to leave go o’ my hand till she gits started off, kinda. She tumbles awful easy, any- way.”

“She ought to be very careful,” agreed Mrs. Chilson. “I wonder if you can tell me how to find Mrs. Muller. She’s the—the caretaker here, I believe.”

“Sure,” returned the boy. “You mean Mis’ Miller, jan’tor woman. Down them there steps. But they aint no ’partments empty now.”

“I don’t care to see apartments, thank you,” explained Mrs. Chilson. “I wanted to see Mrs. Muller—or Miller. Do you know if she is at home?”

“Sure she’s home. Right down them steps. I’ll show yer.”

He limped ahead, and Mrs. Chilson gingerly picked her way down, following him into the dim hallways of the great basement.

“Ma!” shrilled the boy, and soon a door, far down the hall, opened, and a little, round-shouldered woman appeared. She was rosy, too, and clean and smiling, like the teetery little girl up on the sidewalk. She came toward Mrs. Chilson, wiping the suds off her arms on her apron as she came. She halted near the visitor, pleasant-faced, respectful.

“I think I must have made a mistake,” faltered Mrs. Chilson, nervously fingerling her handbag. This woman looked so cheerful! And her children were out romping in the sunshine. “I am looking for a Mrs. Muller—Mrs. Otto Muller—”

“I’m her,” returned the woman, shortly, her smile vanishing. “Only I call it Miller since we come up here. Will you come in?”
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She turned and led the way back along the clean cement floor, past storerooms and the big furnace. At the end of the hall she threw open a door, with a little defiant flourish, and ushered her guest into a neat, bright little "parlor," where the sunshine lay in warm squares on a new, vividly colored carpet, and a shiny center table, weighted with innumerable ornaments, was flanked by two patent rockers. Geraniums bloomed in the windows. Everything was very new and shining and cheerful, except the face of the hostess as she seated herself opposite Mrs. Chilson and waited for her guest to begin.

"I cannot tell you, Mrs.—Miller," Elizabeth Chilson began hesitantly, "how deeply I have been moved by—by your husband's case."

Patient endurance was written on Mrs. Miller's face. She did not speak.

"And how much I sympathize with you," went on Mrs. Chilson. "I have thought and thought about you, until I could scarcely endure it. I know, without your telling me, how terribly you must be suffering now. I wish I could help you. You have all my sympathy."

The woman continued to regard her with that still, baffling look. Mrs. Chilson grew more and more nervous. At last the woman spoke.

"Yer wastin' it," she said.

"What!" gasped Mrs. Chilson.

"Yer sympathry," said the woman, calmly. "I ain't needin' it, you see. What's goin' to happen to him's the best thing ever happened to me, all right."

"Oh, how can you say such a thing!" Mrs. Chilson was plainly horrified. "Of course it was revolting—what he did—but after all he was your husband."

"Oh yes, we was married, ez fur's that goes," agreed the woman. "But marryin' don't change a man that's jest nacherly a devil, ner it don't help a woman that's plum wore out with work an' babies an' bein' beat up reg'lar every two-three days by the meanest white man Gawd ever let live."

"I didn't know he was unkind," faltered Mrs. Chilson.

"O' course you didn't. I never opened my head about 'im. They can't make a wife testify agin her husband, you know. But my lands, it didn't need any o' my testimony to fix 'im. I wouldn't a spoke one word, ner raised a finger to hurt 'im, but as Father O' Donovan was sayin' to me, it was the hand o' the Lord, an' I begin to breathe easy fer the first time in ten years when the jury come back with 'Guilty' fer 'im, an' I knewed he'd never be loose agin to do any more o' his meanness. I don't like talkin' about it, ma'am. I'm tryin' to forgit it all an' start in fresh an' happy with the youngguns in this here new
neighborhood, where they ain’t a soul knows who we are. We was livin’ down on Eighth Avenue right off One Hundred and Twenty-fifth when—when he done it. He was called the janitor o’ the buildin’ there, though I done the work, like I bin doin’ ever since we got married. My lands, ain’t kids cruel little things? I ’spose they don’t know no better, but honest, a young gun can be more cruel than a growed up person. Lessen three days all the hoodlums on the block was tauntin’ my pore little kids about their pa. I seen I better clear out to a new part o’ town, an’ bless yer soul, Father O’Donovan fixed it all up with Mr. Levy slick ez a button, and we been here a coupla months, a’ready. Mr. Levy he’s Jewish, but my lands, if ever I seen a lovely Christian gentleman, it’s him. He’s agent er a lot o’ flat houses all over town, an’ when he seen how it was fer me, stayin’ in that neighborhood where everybody knowed about Otto’s doin’s, he just sez to me, sez ’e, ‘My goodness, Mis’ Miller, don’t you worry none. I got plenty houses needs good honest janitresses that don’t booze. I’ll look things over an’ move you within a month.’ He did, too, an’ it was jest like wakin’ up out of a bad dream to come up here with a new name an’ move into these grand, big, sunny south rooms an’ start all fresh. I bin happy as a queen up here, a’ready, an’ the young guns ain’t like the same children. It’s just like real country life up here, they’s so many vacant lots fer ’em to play in, an’ the streets not so nasty crowded, neither. I don’t feel so nervous about ’em when they’re out, now. It’s just grand up here, every way.”

“Then you aren’t unhappy about—tomorrow?”

“About Otto, you mean? Why no, ma’am, not what you’d say real unhappy. I wouldn’t ever ’a’ done anythin’ to send ’im to the chair, but nobody knows like I do how much he deserves it, an’ after ten years o’ his meanness I can’t say I’d reach out a hand to drawr ’im back. An’ it won’t hurt ’im any more’n takin’ gas to git a tooth pulled.”

Mrs. Chilson was trembling violently now. Somehow the unimpassioned recital of this little bright-eyed woman with the big, rough, knotted, red hands was more upsetting than the wild grief which she had expected to comfort.

“Even if you didn’t love him,” she essayed at length, “he was your husband—he was the father of your children.” Mrs. Chilson had never experienced motherhood, but she believed implicitly all the conventional notions concerning it, one of which is the popular fallacy that bearing children for a man necessarily endears him to a woman. So, “He was the father of your children,” she urged, hoping to find a quivering chord of tenderness somewhere in this queer wife.

“Bein’ a father ain’t no very hard job,” said the woman, thought-
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fully. "The hours is short, too. It's bein' a mother, an' stayin' right on the job twenty-four hours a day through sickness an' health, that's hard—er would be if the younguns didn't pay fer all you do fer 'em, ten times over, bless their little hearts! But my, my, Otto wasn't any kind of father. I ain't goin' to rile up my feelin's with hashin' up ole mem'ries, but I'll jest tell you this much, ma'am, that he killed my first pore little baby before ever it got borned, knockin' me downstairs. An' pore little Herbie he'll go lame to 'is grave from the way Ot abused 'im when 'e was a little chap. I was too young them days to have any sense when 'e was in one o' his tempers. I was scared helpless. After 'e lamed Herbie, though, I spunked up some. But you c'n see they ain't any kind o' love could come through all that. I usta be scared to leave 'im alone with the younguns, when I'd have to be off at work. We was all afraid fer our lives. So it's a real comfortin' feelin' to know we're free of 'im at last. If 'e was let to live fifty years more 'e'd never do a good day's work er speak a decent word! He had a awful good home, when 'e was a boy, an' awful nice folks, back in the old country. They sent the money to hire Ot's lawyers. Ot had good folks, an' good raisin', an' if I do say it myself, 'e had a good wife. But 'e was jest borned a brute. I've heard that women have bin sendin' him flowers to the jail. I s'pose they ain't got no idea how he used to abuse his younguns an' curse at 'em, pore little scared things, an' pocket all the money fer himself, an' buy butter an' beefsteak fer him, an' bread an' tea fer us. I can stan' things fer myself, ma'am, but it hurts to see yer children hungry an' scared. Now is the first time in all their little lives that they ain't had bruises all over 'em. An' they're forgettin' how to sneak an' dodge. They ain't got nobody to be afraid of now. So you see, ma'am, you bin wastin' yer symperthy."

"I see your side of the case," said Mrs. Chilson faintly. "But even so, tomorrow must be an ordeal for you—to know he is being—"

"No, ma'am. I won't think about it much. I guess it takes you easy folks that ain't very busy, to set an' worry an' think such things over. I got all this big buildin', five floors, to tend to, an' I keep my halls clean, too, lemme tell you. Tomorra I'll jest be workin' same as usyal."

"Oh, no!" cried Mrs. Chilson recoiling in horror. "Surely you will not—in the morning—at the very hour—"

"Why yes, ma'am," returned the woman simply. "I got six children to support by cleanin' this here house every day, no matter what. I get up at four to scrub the stairs. It takes till about six. So I reckon ma'am, at the very hour I'll jest be doin' the stairs."