

Mr. Mason, who was a most kindly man, took the hand of the relict of Amos Byrne, as the foreman closed the street door. He was surprised at its softness, surprised at the calm brown eyes and intelligent brow, surprised at the neat, tidy appearance of the young woman, surprised at the tasteful, if inferior, surroundings. He had not been given to visiting the cottages of his employees.

"I'm very sorry for your trouble, Mrs. Byrne," he murmured in a conventional voice and speech, as he surveyed the "Mona Lisa" expression of enigmatical resignation.

A sincere and truthful woman, she could not bring her lips to speak what her heart felt not.

"My trouble is not greater than I can bear, Mr. Mason," she replied, looking frankly into his eyes.

The answer was so unexpected, so unusual under the circumstances—circumstances of which he felt sure she did not know, that the manager sent an inquiring glance at the foreman.

"Come, Mary, you should not speak like that," spoke up Walter Hart; "you might be sorry for it hereafter."

"Walter Hart, you have known me for a long time. Perhaps he has told you," turning to Mr. Mason, "we are old friends, old schoolmates—and you know I always speak as I feel. My husband," she went on in explanation, "was very unkind to me during the three years of our married life; indeed, cruel, absolutely cruel. I lost all love for him long since; but when he was brought home ill five weeks ago, I nursed him as I knew how and followed out the doctor's orders as far as I was able. At first I thought he was shamming; and the doctor, too, thought he was shamming, malingering, I think it was, he called it."

"That is just what I have brought Mr. Mason to see you about now, Mary—you know, your husband was only at the works a few weeks—and I am practically the only friend you have in the town," and Walter placed a chair for her and also asked his manager to be seated.

"You have been very good, Walter, during all this trouble Mr. Mason speaks about, and you are yet very kind, but it is a great relief to me, I can assure you."

Mr. Mason held up his hands in protest at this plain speaking, and motioned Walter to proceed.

"I'm very sorry, Mary—but I've brought you—bad news," whispered Walter in a hesitating voice.

"Not from home, Walter—not from mother," as she folded her white hands resignedly in her lap, with a far-away, New England look.