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BUSINESS.

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THE KNUCKLING DOWN OF
MRS. GAMBLE.

By L. M. Montgomery.

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The Knuckling Down of Mrs. Gamble

L. M. Montgomery

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Mrs. Gamble was knitting by the west window of the kitchen. It was already quite dark in the big, spotless room, for the kitchen of the Gamble farmhouse was on the north side, and was shadowed west and north by a grove of firs.

Outside it was a chill, colorless November dusk; overhead the gray sky was faintly flushed with a transient pink, and lower down, between the dark boughs of the firs and far away over the dull hills, Mrs. Gamble could see the sullen, crimson bars of an autumn sunset. The cherry tree at the corner of the house was tossing its bare boughs weirdly, and shriveled brown leaves went scurrying up and down the garden in uncanny dances before the breath of viewless winds.

Mrs. Gamble dropped her knitting on her lap and leaned forward to look out of the window, through the firs, to that red glow of fading sunset. She was a tall, stout woman of perhaps sixty, for there were many gray threads in the smooth, thick waves of somewhat coarse auburn hair that framed her strong-featured face. Amelia Gamble had never used spectacles in her life, and her light gray eyes were as keen and penetrating as they had ever been, and a good deal harder. She drew her black shawl closer about her square shoulders and shivered a little.

“It’s dreadful cold and bleak out to-night,” she said aloud. She had a habit of talking to herself, for she was a woman who hated to be alone, and was given to many devices for circumventing unwelcome solitude. “I shouldn’t wonder if we had snow before morning. It would be a relief to see those long, bare hills covered over. I hope it won’t rain, anyhow. I hate fall rains. I wish James was home, or that some one would drop in for company. It makes me feel nervous, somehow, to be alone in this big house. I must be getting old and silly when I get such notions in my head!”

She went and poked up the fire. She would have some cheerful light anyhow. Amelia Gamble had been brought up to consider it shameful waste to light a candle before it was absolutely dark, and she had never departed from the traditions of her childhood. Then she went to the other window. It looked out on the long valley of the village, at the head of which the Gamble homestead stood on the hill. The main road wound through the valley, and here and there along the dun slopes early lights twinkled. Mrs. Gamble’s cold eyes swept down the length of the valley, and then fell on a beshawled figure coming up the lane between the rows of bare sweetbrier bushes.

“That’s Lorilla Johnson,” said Mrs. Gamble. “I’d know that wobbly walk o’ hers anywhere. I dunno ‘s I’m glad to see *her*, for all I’ve been wishing some one would step in. She’s a gossip and a pry, and that tongue of hers is hung in the middle. It’s

queer how some folks aren't happy unless they're forever poking their noses into something that don't concern them."

She had been moving swiftly about during this monologue, pushing chairs into place and lighting a lamp. When Lorilla's sharp, imperative little rat-a-tat came at the door Mrs. Gamble opened it, and bade her caller a semi-cordial good evening. But Lorilla Johnson was not to be daunted by a cool reception. It was her maxim to make herself at home under all circumstances, and when she had laid off her hat and shawl, and ensconced herself comfortably in the rocker, she produced from her satchel a long, gray, woolen sock, and began to knit, her tongue keeping time to the click of the needles. She was a thin woman, with a long, colorless face, and pale blue eyes, and had a disagreeable little laugh. Mrs. Gamble disliked her, and Lorilla knew it, but had her own way of taking revenge.

"I knew James wouldn't be back till late," she said, "so I thought I'd run up and keep you company for an hour or so. Don't you find it rather lonesome here by spells?"

"Not particularly," was the curt response. "There's too much to do for that. Fine ladies, with nothing to do, may find time to be lonesome, perhaps. I never could."

Lorilla smiled and shifted her tactics. She understood Amelia Gamble.

"That's so," she assented smoothly. "Fact is, it's a marvel to me how you ever manage to keep up with your work so well. It's a great thing to have your good health. Now me—I'm never well two days at a time. I've a cough now. There's a good deal of sickness round the Center. Dr. Richardson is kept pretty busy, I guess. All the Dales are down with diphtheria."

Lorilla stopped for breath, and Mrs. Gamble narrowed her lips down hardy as she stooped to pick a stray wisp of yarn from the yellow painted floor.

"If there's anything going, the Dales will have it, I'll be bound," she said. "When they are well they go gadding around until they catch something. Where'd they get the diphtheria?"

"Over Carleton way, they say. I s'pose you know Florrie has it too!"

It was the most effective shot in Lorilla's locker, and her lead-colored eyes watched Mrs. Gamble keenly as it was fired. The result disappointed her. Mrs. Gamble started slightly, but showed no other sign of emotion.

"Spencer's Florrie?"

"Yes. Of course, I s'posed you knew; she took down with it Monday. Dr. Richardson says she's pretty bad. I guess Jessie is about worn out. Have you been to see them, Mrs. Gamble?"

A braver woman than Lorilla Johnson might have quailed before the flash of

Amelia Gamble's gray eyes.

"You know as well as I do, Lorilly Johnson, that I've never been to see Jessie Gamble at any time, and don't ever expect to go. She's nothing more to me than any stranger, nor her husband either."

"Mrs. Gamble! Your own son!" faltered Lorilla, deprecatingly.

"He's been no son of mine ever since he married Jessie Greene. I gave him his choice between us, and he made it and must abide by it. I'm sorry to hear Florrie is ill, just as I'd be sorry for anybody's child. Is she dangerous, did you say?"

"The doctor hasn't much hope of her, I believe. Spencer's just distracted, so they say, and Jessie, too. She's their only one, and they're just wrapped up in her. Like as not it's want of proper nursing is the trouble. Jessie isn't much of a hand in sickness, I suppose—never had any experience—and she can't get anyone. People are scared, you know. Diphtheria isn't a thing to be trifled with."

"Jessie Greene never had any faculty for managing, anyhow," said Mrs. Gamble, coldly. "There never was a Greene that had—or any constitution, either. Florrie was always a sickly child. Don't you find it chilly in that corner, Lorilly? Move nearer the fire."

Lorilla understood that Mrs. Gamble considered the discussion of Spencer Gamble's family troubles closed, and nothing more was said on the tabooed subject. When she finally went away Mrs. Gamble sped the parting guest without any regret.

"I wish she'd stayed away," she muttered, "or held her tongue about Spencer's folks when she did come. I don't want to be told anything about them. Lorilly Johnson is always trying to twit me underhand about that affair. Florrie Gamble isn't anything more to me than any other Lawton child. There's James now"—as her quick ear caught the rumble of wheels coming down the hard frozen lane. "I'm sure I'm glad. I don't know what has got into me to-night—I seem to get all of a tremble when I'm left alone."

She had the supper table set for her husband by the time he came in, with his arms full of parcels, which he deposited silently on the dresser. James Gamble was a tall, stoop-shouldered old man, with dim, blinking eyes and long straggles of thin gray hair and whiskers. There was something meek and deprecating about his whole appearance. Lawton gossips said that James Gamble never dared to have an opinion of his own in the presence of his wife.

Supper was a silent meal, neither of the two seeming disposed to talk. As Mrs. Gamble passed her husband his second cup of tea, he cleared his throat tentatively and stirred the tea with the air of a timid man who wants to say something.

"Melie, did you hear that Spencer's Florrie was down with the diphthery?" he

said, hesitatingly. "I heard it down at Shattuck this afternoon."

"Yes, I heard it," answered Mrs. Gamble, coldly. "Lorilly Johnson was here this evening and said so."

"Spencer was in at Morton's store while I was there," James Gamble faltered between nervous swallows of tea. "I heard him telling Tom Keefe about Florrie. He said they hadn't much hopes of her. He seemed awful down-hearted over it."

His wife made no reply. Her face was emotionless and her cold gray eyes gazed unblinkingly at the light. James Gamble moved his chair about restlessly.

"They do say over Shattuck way—I heard Tom Keefe and Bob Sharp talking of it when they didn't know I was around—that Spencer and Jessie ain't very well off this winter. It took most all Spencer's wages to pay the doctor's bills for that sick spell of Jessie's in the summer. Well, it just amounted to this: they appeared to think that Spencer's folks didn't have enough to eat or enough to warm themselves with."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Gamble in a hard, dry voice, "if you heard that about any stranger you'd take them a load of stuff. I suppose you could do as much for Spencer's folks."

"It ain't the same thing," said her husband, huskily, "and Spencer wouldn't take it if I did—you know that, Melie. He's too proud to take for charity what is his by right. He looked peaked and miserable enough himself, and he'd a bad cough too. It just seemed to rack him in pieces like."

A sudden change swept over Amelia Gamble's face, quite marvelous in the transformation it wrought. The hard lines seemed to melt away, the mouth softened. A whole flood of repressed mother love glorified her cold gray eyes. She bent forward insistently.

"Did you tell him to do anything for it?" she asked eagerly. "Did you recommend that emulsion Julius Hackett was taking?"

"I wasn't speaking to him at all, Melie—you know that well enough. He never looked my way."

"Spencer always took coughs so hard," said Mrs. Gamble anxiously, "and he never would take care of himself. I suppose he's run himself down slaving and slaving—and nothing but sickness to contend with."

"Perhaps you might go down and see them to-morrow," suggested her husband timidly. "You'd do as much for a stranger, Melie."

"I don't doubt I would; but you've said yourself this isn't the same thing. Jessie Greene said once that she hoped neither you nor I would ever darken her door; and she can't complain that we have—or ever will," said his wife defiantly.

"You don't know for sure whether she ever said such words or not, Melie. It

might have been nothing but gossip. And if she did, I daresay she was provoked to it. *You* said enough about her; I daresay it all went to her ears.”

“It’s lately you’ve begun to take her part,” said Mrs. Gamble sarcastically. “I wasn’t the only one who said things, James Gamble.”

“I know you weren’t, Melie,” he said humbly. “Only I kind of think now—maybe we were foolish to raise such a row. Of course, I ain’t saying I don’t still think it was a big mistake for Spencer to marry a Greene, but when he did we might as well have made the best of it. This house is big enough for half a dozen families, goodness knows. We’re left all alone in our old age and it’s all because we were cantankerous with Spencer. We were too unreasonable, Melie.”

It was not often James Gamble dared to speak so plainly to his wife. He expected some biting sarcasm in reply but Mrs. Gamble made no response.

Her husband lighted a candle, seated himself near the fire, and tried to read. She washed and put away the dishes, then sat down near him and gazed into the glowing fire.

Was it true, she wondered uneasily, that Spencer and his wife were not so well off in the matter of food and fuel as were others?

Her thoughts traveled remorselessly back over the past as she sat there. Spencer had been her only, idolized son. It had been for him that James Gamble and his wife had toiled and economized—that his inheritance of land and money might surpass any other in Lawton. Everything they had done was with an eye to Spencer’s future benefit. When they had built the new house Mrs. Gamble had insisted that it should be large and handsome, so that when Spencer should bring there a wife he might bring her to no mean or narrowed home. And to think that after all he had married Jessie Greene! It was five years ago. James Gamble and his wife had opposed it bitterly. But Spencer Gamble was his mother’s son. His obstinacy was fully equal to hers. When she had plainly given him his choice between her and Jessie Greene he had not hesitated.

James Gamble had been furious with the temper of a usually meek man, roused at last. He told his son that he would disown him if he married Jessie Greene; and Spencer Gamble had married her, taken her to a tiny house at Lawton Center, and between him and his parents fell a long and unbroken silence.

He struggled along somehow and managed to make a living by hiring out in summer and doing odd jobs in winter. It was not what Spencer Gamble had been used to and he felt the difference keenly.

Amelia Gamble’s heart broke when her son went out from her roof to return no more, but she made no sign. Lawton people said she was the hardest woman they

had ever known. She never even looked at Jessie or Spencer when she met them. This cold November evening, it was five months since she had seen her son—for after his marriage he had not even attended Lawton church. Instead he had gone with Jessie to the little Methodist church over at Shattuck, and this was another of the grievances of Mrs. Gamble, senior.

There had never been a moment in all the five long, lonely years that her heart has not yearned secretly over him, although she never admitted it. Now, as she sat over the dying embers, she confessed to herself at last that she had been hard and unjust. As her husband said, it would have been wiser to have made the best of it. After all, poor as the Greenes were, nothing except her poverty and some disreputable relatives could have been urged against Jessie herself. She might have learned to love her for Spencer's sake. The house was big enough for them all. It would have been pleasant to have had Spencer's wife for company and Spencer's golden-haired little girl playing about the old place.

And now little Florrie was dying and Spencer was ill. Mrs. Gamble wiped away some unaccustomed tears. The fire had gone out and the room was getting very cold.

At the next morning's breakfast table Mrs. Gamble broke a long silence so abruptly that her husband started.

"James, I'm going to walk down to the Center after breakfast and see Spencer's folks. I suppose if some of us have got to knuckle down it's my place to do it. Anyhow, I won't have much peace of mind if I don't go. I daresay Jessie'll shut the door in my face."

"I'm sure she won't do anything of the kind," said her husband eagerly, an expression of relief coming out strongly on his thin, pinched features. "She'll be glad enough to see you, no doubt. We ought to have done it long ago. Better take a basket along with you, Melie—maybe, if Jessie's had to wait on Florrie, all by herself, she'll have got behindhand with other things."

It was a generous basket that Mrs. Gamble packed, albeit with a grim face. She kept that same grim face on as she walked down the valley road. Snow had come in the night, and was still falling softly. The plowed fields were stretches of snowy dimples, and the barn roofs were like sheets of marble. The spruces stood up along the road feathered over whitely, and every twig on the beeches was outlined in pearl. The far away hills loomed dimly through the misty veil of snowflakes.

To Mrs. Gamble it seemed as if the very cows in the barnyards, blinking their mild eyes at her over the fences, with broad-rayed flakes clinging to their sides, knew her errand. The faces she saw looking at her from the windows seemed to

wear significant smiles. A neighbor's hearty greeting seemed over-charged with sinister meaning. More than once she was on the point of turning back. Could it be possible that she, Amelia Gamble, was going to "knuckle down" to Jessie Greene—a Greene from Shattuck, at that?

Yet she went steadily on till she found herself standing before the door of Spencer Gamble's tiny house at the Center. From the windows of a house opposite she saw Lorilla Johnson's pale, curious face peering out. In spite of herself, Mrs. Gamble smiled. Spurred on by the consciousness of being watched by Lorilla, she rapped sharply at Spencer's door—and then stepped back, with a vague impulse to run from the spot in spite of a dozen Lorillas.

Spencer himself, hollow-eyed and unshaven, opened the door. Amazement, incredulity, and alarm, chased each other over his haggard face. He was too surprised to speak, and stood dumbly in the doorway.

"Come, Spencer, ain't you going to ask me in?" said his mother, crisply. "I haven't walked all the way down here in the snow for nothing. How is Florrie—and Jessie?"

She brought the last word out with a choke. It broke the back of her pride, but it was a hard blow. Spencer stepped back embarrassed.

"Of course—come in, mother. Jessie—Florrie—they're well—no, I mean—" Mrs. Gamble pushed past him and went in. There was nobody in the neglected kitchen. She stalked to the door of the little bedroom off it, and peered in grimly.

Jessie Gamble, bending over her child's cot, started with dismay as she saw her mother-in-law. She looked thin and heart-broken. When Spencer Gamble had married her she had been the prettiest girl in Shattuck. Now, the color was all gone from her long cheeks, her soft, fairish-brown hair was falling loosely on her neck, and her large, wistful brown eyes were full of fear and sorrow.

Something—pride, coldness, disappointment, or whatever it was—gave way in Mrs. Gamble's heart at that moment. She did not say anything, but she held out her arms, and the next moment the younger woman was sobbing in them.

It was half an hour before Mrs. Gamble came out to the kitchen, which Spencer was clumsily trying to restore to order. She had her bonnet and shawl off, and was tying a big apron about her substantial waist.

"Jessie's clean tucked out, Spencer. She's gone to sleep in there, and I'm going to look after Florrie. I believe she'll pull through. Doctor Richardson don't know everything. I never had much opinion of him, anyway. If you haven't had time to do much cooking, you'll find something eatable in that basket, I dare say. I knew you'd be all sort of upset, so I brought it along. Then I want you to go home and tell

father I won't be back to-day, and he must cook his own meals. You needn't be afraid to," she added, seeing the doubt on her son's face, "he'll be glad to see you again, Spencer."

When the doctor came that night it was to find Florrie out of danger.

"It's all owing to you, mother," said Jessie, humbly. "If you hadn't come to-day I believe Florrie would have died. I was so weak and sick myself I couldn't do right for her. I haven't been real strong since the summer."

A month later the house at the Center was locked up and the windows boarded over. Spencer Gamble and his wife and child had moved to the big house on the hill.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Knuckling Down of Mrs. Gamble* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]