

Excerpt from *The Crux: A Novel* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1911)

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## CHAPTER I THE BACK WAY

Along the same old garden path,  
Sweet with the same old flowers;  
Under the lilacs, darkly dense,  
The easy gate in the backyard fence—  
Those unforgotten hours!

The "Foote Girls" were bustling along Margate Street with an air of united purpose that was unusual with them. Miss Rebecca wore her black silk cloak, by which it might be seen that "a call" was toward. Miss Josie, the thin sister, and Miss Sallie, the fat one, were more hastily attired. They were persons of less impressiveness than Miss Rebecca, as was tacitly admitted by their more familiar nicknames, a concession never made by the older sister.

Even Miss Rebecca was hurrying a little, for her, but the others were swifter and more impatient.

"Do come on, Rebecca. Anybody'd think you were eighty instead of fifty!" said Miss Sallie.

"There's Mrs. Williams going in! I wonder if she's heard already. Do hurry!" urged Miss Josie.

But Miss Rebecca, being concerned about her dignity, would not allow herself to be hustled, and the three proceeded in irregular order under the high-arched elms and fence-topping syringas of the small New England town toward the austere home of Mr. Samuel Lane.

It was a large, uncompromising, square, white house, planted starkly in the close-cut grass. It had no porch for summer lounging, no front gate for evening dalliance, no path-bordering beds of flowers from which to pluck a hasty offering or more redundant tribute. The fragrance which surrounded it came from the back yard, or over the fences of neighbors; the trees which waved greenly about it were the trees of other people. Mr. Lane had but two trees, one on each side of the straight and narrow path, evenly placed between house and sidewalk—evergreens.

Mrs. Lane received them amiably; the minister's new wife, Mrs. Williams, was proving a little difficult to entertain. She was from Cambridge, Mass., and emanated a restrained consciousness of that fact. Mr. Lane rose stiffly and greeted them. He did not like the Foote girls, not having the usual American's share of the sense of humor. He had no enjoyment of the town joke, as old as they were, that "the three of them made a full yard;" and had frowned down as a profane impertinent the man—a little sore under some effect of gossip—who had amended it with "make an 'ell, I say."

Safely seated in their several rocking chairs, and severally rocking them, the Misses Foote burst forth, as was their custom, in simultaneous, though by no means identical remarks.

"I suppose you've heard about Morton Elder?"

"What do you think Mort Elder's been doing now?"

"We've got bad news for poor Miss Elder!"

Mrs. Lane was intensely interested. Even Mr. Lane showed signs of animation.

"I'm not surprised," he said.

"He's done it now," opined Miss Josie with conviction. "I always said Rella Elder was spoiling that boy."

"It's too bad—after all she's done for him! He always was a scamp!" Thus Miss Sallie.

"I've been afraid of it all along," Miss Rebecca was saying, her voice booming through the lighter tones of her sisters. "I always said he'd never get through college."

"But who is Morton Elder, and what has he done?" asked Mrs. Williams as soon as she could be heard.

This lady now proved a most valuable asset. She was so new to the town, and had been so immersed in the suddenly widening range of her unsalaried duties as "minister's wife," that she had never even heard of Morton Elder.

A new resident always fans the languishing flame of local conversation. The whole shopworn stock takes on a fresh lustre, topics long trampled flat in much discussion lift their heads anew, opinions one scarce dared to repeat again become almost authoritative, old stories flourish freshly, acquiring new detail and more vivid color.

Mrs. Lane, seizing her opportunity while the sisters gasped a momentary amazement at anyone's not knowing the town scapegrace, and taking advantage of her position as old friend and near neighbor of the family under discussion, swept into the field under such headway that even the Foote girls remained silent perforce; surcharged, however, and holding their breaths in readiness to burst forth at the first opening.

"He's the nephew— orphan nephew— of Miss Elder—who lives right back of us—our yards touch—we've always been friends—went to school together, Rella's never married—she teaches, you know—and her brother—he owned the home—it's all hers now, he died all of a sudden and left two children—Morton and Susie. Mort was about seven years old and Susie just a baby. He's been an awful cross—but she just idolizes him—she's spoiled him, I tell her."

Mrs. Lane had to breathe, and even the briefest pause left her stranded to wait another chance. The three social benefactors proceeded to distribute their information in a clattering torrent. They sought to inform Mrs. Williams in especial, of numberless details of the early life and education of their subject, matters which would have been treated more appreciatively if they had not been blessed with

the later news; and, at the same time, each was seeking for a more dramatic emphasis to give this last supply of incident with due effect.

No regular record is possible where three persons pour forth statement and comment in a rapid, tumultuous stream, interrupted by cross currents of heated contradiction, and further varied by the exclamations and protests of three hearers, or at least, of two; for the one man present soon relapsed into disgusted silence.

Mrs. Williams, turning a perplexed face from one to the other, inwardly condemning the darkening flood of talk, yet conscious of a sinful pleasure in it, and anxious as a guest, *and* a minister's wife, to be most amiable, felt like one watching three kinetoscopes at once. She saw, in confused pictures of blurred and varying outline, Orella Elder, the young New England girl, only eighteen, already a "school ma'am," suddenly left with two children to bring up, and doing it, as best she could. She saw the boy, momentarily changing, in his shuttlecock flight from mouth to mouth, through pale shades of open mischief to the black and scarlet of hinted sin, the terror of the neighborhood, the darling of his aunt, clever, audacious, scandalizing the quiet town.

"Boys are apt to be mischievous, aren't they?" she suggested when it was possible.

"He's worse than mischievous," Mr. Lane assured her sourly. "There's a mean streak in that family."

"That's on his mother's side," Mrs. Lane hastened to add. "She was a queer girl—came from New York."

The Foote girls began again, with rich profusion of detail, their voices rising shrill, one above the other, and playing together at their full height like emulous fountains.

"We ought not to judge, you know;" urged Mrs. Williams. "What do you say he's really done?"

Being sifted, it appeared that this last and most terrible performance was to go to "the city" with a group of "the worst boys of college," to get undeniably drunk, to do some piece of mischief. (Here was great licence in opinion, and in contradiction.)

"*Anyway* he's to be suspended!" said Miss Rebecca with finality.

"Suspended!" Miss Josie's voice rose in scorn. "*Expelled!* They said he was expelled."

"In disgrace!" added Miss Sallie.

Vivian Lane sat in the back room at the window, studying in the lingering light of the long June evening. At least, she appeared to be studying. Her tall figure was bent over her books, but the dark eyes blazed under their delicate level brows, and her face flushed and paled with changing feelings.

She had heard—who, in the same house, could escape hearing the Misses Foote?—and had followed the torrent of description, hearsay, surmise and allegation with an interest that was painful in its intensity.

"It's a *shame!*" she whispered under her breath. "A *shame!* And nobody to stand up for him!"

She half rose to her feet as if to do it herself, but sank back irresolutely.

A fresh wave of talk rolled forth.

"It'll half kill his aunt."

"Poor Miss Elder! I don't know what she'll do!"

"I don't know what *he'll* do. He can't go back to college."

"He'll have to go to work."

"I'd like to know where—nobody'd hire him in this town."

The girl could bear it no longer. She came to the door, and there, as they paused to speak to her, her purpose ebbed again.

"My daughter, Vivian, Mrs. Williams," said her mother; and the other callers greeted her familiarly.

"You'd better finish your lessons, Vivian," Mr. Lane suggested.

"I have, father," said the girl, and took a chair by the minister's wife. She had a vague feeling that if she were there, they would not talk so about Morton Elder.

Mrs. Williams hailed the interruption gratefully. She liked the slender girl with the thoughtful eyes and pretty, rather pathetic mouth, and sought to draw her out. But her questions soon led to unfortunate results.

"You are going to college, I suppose?" she presently inquired; and Vivian owned that it was the desire of her heart.

"Nonsense!" said her father. "Stuff and nonsense, Vivian! You're not going to college."

The Foote girls now burst forth in voluble agreement with Mr. Lane. His wife was evidently of the same mind; and Mrs. Williams plainly regretted her question. But Vivian mustered courage enough to make a stand, strengthened perhaps by the depth of the feeling which had brought her into the room.

"I don't know why you're all so down on a girl's going to college. Eve Marks has gone, and Mary Spring is going—and both the Austin girls. Everybody goes now."

"I know one girl that won't," was her father's incisive comment, and her mother said quietly, "A girl's place is at home—'till she marries."

"Suppose I don't want to marry?" said Vivian.

"Don't talk nonsense," her father answered. "Marriage is a woman's duty."

"What do you want to do?" asked Miss Josie in the interests of further combat. "Do you want to be a doctor, like Jane Bellair?"

"I should like to very much indeed," said the girl with quiet intensity. "I'd like to be a doctor in a babies' hospital."

"More nonsense," said Mr. Lane. "Don't talk to me about that woman! You attend to your studies, and then to your home duties, my dear."

The talk rose anew, the three sisters contriving all to agree with Mr. Lane in his opinions about college, marriage and Dr. Bellair, yet to disagree violently among themselves.

Mrs. Williams rose to go, and in the lull that followed the liquid note of a whippoorwill met the girl's quick ear. She quietly slipped out, unnoticed.