According to Solomon

“H e that rebuketh a man afterwards shall find more favor than he that flattereth with his tongue,” said Mr. Solomon Bankside to his wife Mary.

“It’s the other way with a woman, I think;” she answered him, “you might put that in.”

“Tut, tut, Molly,” said he; “Add not unto his words,—do not speak lightly of the wisdom of the great king.”

“I don’t mean to, dear, but—when you hear it all the time”—

“He that turneth away his ear from the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination,” answered Mr. Bankside.

“I believe you know every one of those old Proverbs by heart,” said his wife with some heat. “Now that’s not disrespectful!—they are old!—and I do wish you’d forget some of them!”

He smiled at her quizzically, tossing back his heavy silver-gray hair with the gesture she had always loved. His eyes were deep blue and bright under their bushy brows; and the mouth was kind—in its iron way. “I can think of at least three to squelch you with, Molly,” said he, “but I won’t.”

“O I know the one you want! ’A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike!’ I’m not contentious, Solomon!”

“No, you are not,” he frankly admitted. “What I really had in mind was this—’A prudent wife is from the Lord,’ and ’He that findeth a wife findeth a good thing; and obtaineth favor of the Lord.’”

She ran around the table in the impulsive way years did not alter, and kissed him warmly.

“I’m not scolding you, my dear,” he continued; “but if you had all the money you’d like to give away—there wouldn’t be much left!”

“But look at what you spend on me!” she urged.

“That’s a wise investment—as well as a deserved reward,” her husband answered calmly. “’There is that scattereth and yet increaseth,’ you know,
my dear; 'And there is that withholdeth more than is meet—and it tendeth to poverty!' Take all you get my dear—it's none too good for you.”

He gave her his goodby kiss with special fondness, put on his heavy satin-lined overcoat and went to the office.

Mr. Solomon Bankside was not a Jew; though his last name suggested and his first seemed to prove it; also his proficiency in the Old Testament gave color to the idea. No, he came from Vermont; of generations of unbroken New England and old English Puritan ancestry, where the Solomons and Isaacs and Zedekiahs were only mitigated by the Standfats and Praise-the-Lords. Pious, persistent pig-headed folk were they, down all the line.

His wife had no such simple pedigree. A streak of Huguenot blood she had (some of the best in France, though neither of them knew that), a grandmother from Albany with a Van to her name; a great grandmother with a Mac; and another with an O'; even a German cross came in somewhere. Mr. Bankside was devoted to genealogy, and had been at some pains to dig up these facts—the more he found the worse he felt, and the lower ran his opinion of Mrs. Bankside's ancestry.

She had been a fascinating girl; pretty, with the dash and piquancy of an oriole in a May apple-tree; clever and efficient in everything her swift hands touched; quite a spectacular housekeeper; and the sober, long-faced young downeasterner had married her with a sudden decision that he often wondered about in later years. So did she.

What he had not sufficiently weighed at the time, was her spirit of incorrigible independence, and a light-mindedness which, on maturer judgment, he could almost term irreligious. His conduct was based on principle, all of it; built firmly into habit and buttressed by scriptural quotations. Hers seemed to him as inconsequent as the flight of a moth. Studying it, in his solemn conscientious way, in the light of his genealogical researches, he felt that all her uncertainties were accounted for, and that the error was his—in having married too many kinds of people at once.

They had been, and were, very happy together none the less: though sometimes their happiness was a little tottery. This was one of the times. It was the day after Christmas, and Mrs. Bankside entered the big drawing room, redolent of popcorn and evergreen, and walked slowly to the corner where the fruits of yesterday were lovingly arranged; so few that she had been able to give—so many that she had received.

There were the numerous pretty interchangeable things given her by her many friends; “presents,” suitable to any lady. There were the few perfectly
selected ones given by the few who knew her best. There was the rather perplexing gift of Mrs. MacAvelly. There was her brother’s stiff white envelope enclosing a check. There were the loving gifts of children and grandchildren.

Finally there was Solomon’s.

It was his custom to bestow upon her one solemn and expensive object, a boon as it were, carefully selected, after much thought and balancing of merits; but the consideration was spent on the nature of the gift—not on the desires of the recipient. There was the piano she could not play, the statue she did not admire, the set of Dante she never read, the heavy gold bracelet, the stiff diamond brooch—and all the others. This time it was a set of sables, costing even more than she imagined.

Christmas after Christmas had these things come to her; and she stood there now, thinking of that procession of unvalued valuables, with an expression so mixed and changeful it resembled a kaleidoscope. Love for Solomon, pride in Solomon, respect for Solomon’s judgment and power to pay, gratitude for his unfailing kindness and generosity, impatience with his always giving her this one big valuable permanent thing, when he knew so well that she much preferred small renewable cheap ones; her personal dislike of furs, the painful conviction that brown was not becoming to her—all these and more filled the little woman with what used to be called “conflicting emotions.”

She smoothed out her brother’s check, wishing as she always did that it had come before Christmas, so that she might buy more presents for her beloved people. Solomon liked to spend money on her—in his own way; but he did not like to have her spend money on him—or on anyone for that matter. She had asked her brother once, if he would mind sending her his Christmas present beforehand.

“Not on your life, Polly!” he said. “You’d never see a cent of it! You can’t buy ’em many things right on top of Christmas, and it’ll be gone long before the next one.”

She put the check away and turned to examine her queerest gift. Upon which scrutiny presently entered the donor.

“I’m ever so much obliged, Benigna,” said Mrs. Bankside. “You know how I love to do things. It’s a loom, isn’t it? Can you show me how it works?”

“Of course I can, my dear; that’s just what I ran in for—I was afraid you wouldn’t know. But you are so clever with your hands that I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. I do.”

Whereat Mrs. MacAvelly taught Mrs. Bankside the time-honored art of
weaving. And Mrs. Bankside enjoyed it more than any previous handicraft she had essayed.

She did it well, beginning with rather coarse and simple weaves; and gradually learning the finer grades of work. Despising as she did the more modern woolens, she bought real wool yarn of a lovely red—and made some light warm flannelly stuff in which she proceeded to rapturously enclose her little grandchildren.

Mr. Bankside warmly approved, murmuring affectionately, “‘She seeketh wool and flax—she worketh willingly with her hands.’

He watched little Bob and Polly strenuously “helping” the furnace man to clear the sidewalk, hopping about like red-birds in their new caps and coats; and his face beamed with the appositeness of his quotation, as he remarked, “‘She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet!’” and he proffered an extra, wholly spontaneous kiss, which pleased her mightily.

“You dear man!” she said with a hug; “I believe you’d rather find a proverb to fit than a gold mine!”

To which he triumphantly responded: “‘Wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it.’”

She laughed sweetly at him. “And do you think wisdom stopped with that string of proverbs?”

“You can’t get much beyond it,” he answered calmly. “If we lived up to all there is in that list we shouldn’t be far out, my dear!”

Whereat she laughed again, smoothed his gray mane, and kissed him in the back of his neck. “You dear thing!” said Mrs. Bankside.

She kept herself busy with the new plaything as he called it. Hands that had been rather empty were now smoothly full. Her health was better, and any hint of occasional querulousness disappeared entirely; so that her husband was moved to fresh admiration of her sunny temper, and quoted for the hundredth time, “‘She openeth her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue is the law of kindness.’”

Mrs. MacAvelly taught her to make towels. But Mrs. Bankside’s skill outstripped hers; she showed inventive genius and designed patterns of her own. The fineness and quality of the work increased; and she joyfully replenished her linen chest with her own handiwork.

“I tell you, my dear,” said Mrs. MacAvelly, “if you’d be willing to sell them you could get almost any price for those towels. With the initials woven in. I know I could get you orders—through the Woman’s Exchange, you know!”
Mrs. Bankside was delighted. “What fun!” she said. “And I needn't appear at all?”

“No, you needn't appear at all—do let me try.”

So Mrs. Bankside made towels of price, soft, fine, and splendid, till she was weary of them; and in the opulence of constructive genius fell to devising woven belts of elaborate design.

These were admired excessively. All her women friends wanted one, or more; the Exchange got hold of it, there was a distinct demand; and finally Mrs. MacAvelly came in one day with a very important air and a special order.

“I don't know what you'll think, my dear,” she said, “but I happen to know the Percys very well—the big store people, you know; and Mr. Percy was talking about those belts of yours to me;—of course he didn't know they are yours; but he said (the Exchange people told him I knew, you see) he said, 'If you can place an order with that woman, I can take all she'll make and pay her full price for them. Is she poor?’ he asked. 'Is she dependent on her work?' And I told him, 'Not altogether.' And I think he thinks it an interesting case! Anyhow, there's the order. Will you do it?”

Mrs. Bankside was much excited. She wanted to very much, but dreaded offending her husband. So far she had not told him of her quiet trade in towels; but hid and saved this precious money—the first she had ever earned.

The two friends discussed the pros and cons at considerable length; and finally with some perturbation, she decided to accept the order.

“You'll never tell, Benigna!” she urged. "Solomon would never forgive me, I'm afraid.”

"Why of course I won't—you needn't have a moment's fear of it. You give them to me—I'll stop with the carriage you see; and I take them to the Exchange—and he gets them from there.”

“It seems like smuggling!” said Mrs. Bankside delightedly. “I always did love to smuggle!”

“They say women have no conscience about laws, don't they?” Mrs. MacAvelly suggested.

“Why should we?” answered her friend. “We don't make 'em—nor God—nor nature. Why on earth should we respect a set of silly rules made by some men one day and changed by some more the next?”

“Bless us, Polly! Do you talk to Mr. Bankside like that?”

“Indeed I don't!” answered her hostess, holding out a particularly beau-
tiful star-patterned belt to show to advantage. “There are lots of things I don't say to Mr. Bankside—‘A man of understanding holdeth his peace’ you know—or a woman.”

She was a pretty creature, her hair like that of a powdered marchioness, her rosy cheeks and firm slight figure suggesting a charmer in Dresden china.

Mrs. MacAvelly regarded her admiringly. “Where there is no wood the fire goeth out; so where there is no tale bearer the strife ceaseth,” she proudly offered, “I can quote that much myself.”

But Mrs. Bankside had many misgivings as she pursued her audacious way; the busy hours flying away from her, and the always astonishing checks flying toward her in gratifying accumulation. She came down to her well-planned dinners gracious and sweet; always effectively dressed; spent the cozy quiet evenings with her husband, or went out with him, with a manner of such increased tenderness and charm that his heart warmed anew to the wife of his youth; and he even relented a little toward her miscellaneous ancestors.

As the days shortened and darkened she sparkled more and more; with little snatches of song now and then; gay ineffectual strumming on the big piano; sudden affectionate darts at him, with quaintly distributed caresses. “Molly!” said he, “I don't believe you're a day over twenty! What makes you act so?”

“Don't you like it, So?” she asked him. That was the nearest she ever would approximate to his name.

He did like it, naturally, and even gave her an extra ten dollars to buy Christmas presents with; while he meditated giving her an electric run-about;—to her!—who was afraid of a wheelbarrow!

When the day arrived and the family were gathered together, Mrs. Bankside, wearing the diamond brooch, the gold bracelet, the point lace handkerchief—everything she could carry of his accumulated generosity—and such an air of triumphant mystery that the tree itself was dim beside her; handed out to her astonished relatives such an assortment of desirable articles that they found no words to express their gratitude.

“Why, Mother!” said Jessie, whose husband was a minister and salaried as such, “Why, Mother—how did you know we wanted just that kind of a rug!—and a sewing-machine too! And this lovely suit—and—and—why Mother!”

But her son-in-law took her aside and kissed her solemnly. He had
wanted that particular set of sociological books for years—and never hoped to get them; or that bunch of magazines either.

Nellie had “married rich”; she was less ostentatiously favored; but she had shown her thankfulness a week ago—when her mother had handed her a check.

“Sh, sh! my dear!” her mother had said, “Not one word. I know! What pleasant weather we’re having.”

This son-in-law was agreeably surprised, too; and the other relatives, married and single; while the children rioted among their tools and toys, taking this Christmas like any other, as a season of unmitigated joy.

Mr. Solomon Bankside looked on with growing amazement, making computations in his practiced mind; saying nothing whatever. Should he criticize his wife before others?

But when his turn came—when gifts upon gifts were offered to him—sets of silken handkerchiefs (he couldn’t bear the touch of a silk handkerchief!), a cabinet of cards and chips and counters of all sorts (he never played cards), an inlaid chess-table and ivory men (the game was unknown to him), a gorgeous scarf-pin (he abominated jewelery), a five pound box of candy (he never ate it), his feelings so mounted within him, that since he would not express and could not repress them, he summarily went up stairs to his room.

She found him there later, coming in blushing, smiling, crying a little too—like a naughty but charming child.

He swallowed hard as he looked at her; and his voice was a little strained.

“I can take a joke as well as any man, Molly. I guess we’re square on that. But—my dear!—where did you get it?”

“Earned it,” said she, looking down, and fingering her lace handkerchief.

“Earned it! My wife, earning money! How—if I may ask?”

“By my weaving, dear—the towels and the belts—I sold ’em. Don’t be angry—nobody knows—my name didn’t appear at all! Please don’t be angry!—It isn’t wicked, and it was such fun!”

“No—it’s not wicked, I suppose,” said he rather grimly. “But it is certainly a most mortifying and painful thing to me—most unprecedented.”

“Not so unprecedented, Dear,” she urged, “Even the woman you think most of did it! Don’t you remember ‘She maketh fine linen and selleth it—and delivereth girdles unto the merchants!’”

Mr. Bankside came down handsomely.

He got used to it after a while, and then he became proud of it. If a friend ventured to suggest a criticism, or to sympathize, he would calmly respond,
“‘The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates.’”

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