



# All Done by Kindness

by DENNIS McELDOWNEY

THE new people haven't moved in yet, and the house is standing empty. There are no curtains in the windows, the grass has grown long, and space-men stalk one another through it. Mrs. O'Leary, who lives on the left, stands on her lawn, and Mrs. Wallace, who lives on the right, stands on hers; and they look across the vacant section and nod to each other. A nod of satisfaction. The neighbourhood's well rid of that lot, the nods say. Well rid, the old hypocrites, the nods add, before they turn their attention to their youngest children. "If you go out that gate I'll take the stick to you!"

The house stands impassive, unmoved by the judgment the nods have passed on its late owners. Yet the odd thing is that if Mrs. O'Leary and Mrs. Wallace had been asked only three months ago what kind of neighbours they had, they would have united in praising the Robertsons, who lived between. The kindest couple, they would have agreed in describing them; they were so lucky to have such neighbours, the Robertsons were goodness itself, the kind of people who never had a harsh word to say of anyone.

And now it seemed they'd been saying the most outrageous things about everyone. Hypocrisy was the only word. Unless you knew the true story.

These Robertsons were a young-middle-aged couple. He was a little chap who worked for a draper in town, and when he came home sat with the paper and a pipe in the living room and at the weekends dug the garden. She was short, too, and fading, with fuzzy reddish hair. Usually she could be seen shaking a duster out of one or other of the windows, flapping it gently. All her movements were gentle. So were his. They were a gentle couple. After twenty years of gentle married life without children they'd grown into the state that twins often start out in. One could begin a sentence and the other finish it without anyone noticing the transition: and after someone had been talking to them he'd have difficulty in

remembering which of the Robertsons had said which thing.

When they bought this house the neighbours felt some concern at having a childless couple next door. They were afraid the noise of the children would lead to complaints and unpleasantness. But as Mrs. O'Leary was soon telling Mrs. Wallace, and Mrs. Wallace repeating to Mrs. O'Leary, they needn't have worried. They couldn't have wanted more considerate people. The children soon had the run of the place—when they wanted to. The Robertsons didn't fuss them, but when little May O'Leary took it into her head to visit Mrs. Robertson she always had something out of the biscuit tin before she was taken home to Mum.

Once or twice the kids went a bit over the edge. There was the time Michael Wallace trampled several new and precious delphinium plants when he was looking for a ball he'd hit over the fence; and there was the time his young brother Peter climbed the young plum tree and cracked a branch, the only branch that had fruited that year. On these occasions the Robertsons were horribly distressed: it was agony to them to give even the mildest rebuke; they had to screw themselves up to do it.

The Robertsons were like that. Mild and humble, they felt it a breach of good manners to oppose their opinions to anyone. Bill O'Leary was a true-blue conservative when he got on to politics. The trouble with the country, he'd say, was too much democracy; things were better ordered in the old days. He was rather young to have got himself into this condition you'd have thought. His wife explained it by saying Bill always did have to be different. But if he got on to politics with the Robertsons when he'd gone over to borrow the hedge-clippers, he found he had a sympathetic ear from both of them.

"There was a lot to be said for aristocracy," Bill would say, standing there in his shirt-sleeves; and Mr. Robertson would say, yes, indeed, there was a

lot to be said for aristocracy.

"After all," Bill went on with his familiar argument, "when a person's born to power he doesn't think anything of it and he doesn't abuse it. It's only people who've risen from the mob who make power their one aim and become a menace."

Mrs. Robertson was passing from the shed to the kitchen with the vegetables for dinner.

"I'd never have been able to put it as well as that," she said, "but it's just what I've often thought myself."

"We're on the wrong track altogether," Bill said.

"And the sooner we get on the right one," Mr. Robertson said.

"The better," Mrs. Robertson said.

Bill was looking popped at Mrs. Robertson's handful of vegetables.

"Artichokes!" he said "I can't stand artichokes. Just can't stand them."

Mrs. Robertson looked at them. Her hand twitched. You could see she wished it weren't too late to put them behind her back. She felt convicted of an indiscretion.

"We're not that keen on them ourselves," said Mr. Robertson, whose mouth was watering for the taste of them.

"Not really," Mrs. Robertson said, "but you have to use what's in the garden."

"Cost of living," Mr. Robertson explained.

"All the fault," Bill O'Leary said, "of the equalitarian pretence that everyone can have everything," and he left.

But when Jim Wallace got on to politics, when he came over to borrow the spray-pump, it was surprising how much the Robertsons found in his opinions to agree with, for Jim Wallace's views were the exact opposite of Bill O'Leary's, and they often had heated arguments in the bus coming home. The Robertsons were sometimes appalled at what they'd committed themselves to when they'd been talking to Bill or Jim, one or the other, "But after all," they'd assure themselves, "it isn't important. Not as important, anyway, as keeping on good terms with the neighbours."

And they did that all right. Mrs. O'Leary and Mrs. Wallace often dropped in on an afternoon for a chat. Sometimes they came together, and sat side-by-side on the sofa, Mrs. O'Leary large and fair, Mrs. Wallace large and dark; and they told Mrs. Robertson the news of the neighbourhood which somehow they had a greater knack of picking up than she had. Between them they gave her a balanced view.

"She's a terrific snob," Mrs. O'Leary would say of the woman three doors along, whom she couldn't stand. "You can tell it by the way she talks. And walks."

"I don't really agree with you about that," Mrs. Wallace would say. "Anyway, I wish I had such delightful children myself."

"Oh, she keeps them under, all right," Mrs. O'Leary said.

It was natural enough that when Mrs. Wallace came in by herself the conversation should come round to Mrs. O'Leary.

"Of course, I'm very fond of Mavis," Mrs. Wallace said to Mrs. Robertson one day, and to Mr. Robertson, because he was home from work for some reason. "Very fond of her. I mean, we're the best of friends. But that doesn't keep me from seeing she has faults."

"We all have our faults," Mrs. Robertson agreed, snapping a piece of embroidery cotton with her teeth.

"Our faults, undoubtedly," Mr. Robertson added, laying his glasses down on the gardening book he'd been reading.

"But I should think she has fewer than most people," Mrs. Robertson said gently.

"Far fewer, I should think," Mr. Robertson said.

"I admit that," Mrs. Wallace said. "She's a fine person through and through—really. And yet at times, you know, she's quite unpredictable."

"Is that so?" Mrs. Robertson said.

"So?" Mr. Robertson said.

"There are times," Mrs. Wallace told them, "when she's falling all over me and comes into the house every day; and then suddenly when I go to her place she almost shuts the door in my face, because she's come over all friendly with Mrs. Todd across the road. There's more money in the Todd house than in all the rest of the road combined, you know."

"So I've thought," Mrs. Robertson said.

"Two cars," Mr. Robertson said.

"Not that I mind Mavis being friendly with Mrs. Todd, don't think that," Mrs. Wallace said, "but she should have more control over her feelings."

"Perhaps that's a matter of upbringing," Mrs. Robertson suggested.

"That's often the case," said her husband.

"Not always the fault of the person herself," Mrs. Robertson said.

"I expect you're right," Mrs. Wallace said. "Mavis's people are very nice, but they are rather rough."

"However nice the people, basically," Mr. Robertson said, "a lack of breeding will show."

"And yet considering the original ill-breeding," Mrs. Robertson said.

"It's remarkable what winning ways Mrs. O'Leary has with her," Mr. Robertson said.

"Oh, I quite agree," Mrs. Wallace said. "—it's just that sometimes..."

"It's just that sometimes," Mrs. O'Leary said about Mrs. Wallace when she visited Mrs. Robertson alone one afternoon. "well, I don't quite know how to put it, but there's something you can't quite set at about Sophie."

"A certain reserve, perhaps?" Mrs. Robertson suggested.

"I suppose you might call it reserve," Mrs. O'Leary said, "but well, I don't know, sometimes it's more like downright standoffishness."

"There may be something of that in her," Mrs. Robertson admitted, "if it isn't just shyness, but very often such a trait is a matter of upbringing, don't you think?"

"You mean it isn't always the person's fault?"

"That's what I mean."

"But you'd think if Sophie had wanted to, if you see what I mean, she'd had done something about it by now."

"I quite see your point; there's no need for her to be as cold and aloof as she sometimes appears to be; but you

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