

A close-up photograph of a woman with long, dark, curly hair. She is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. Her hands are pressed against her mouth, completely covering it, as if she is trying to keep a secret or is in a state of shock or denial. The background is plain white.

Truth Telling

CHARACTER BUILDING STORIES

"I cannot understand," said a dear young mother who was calling upon us one afternoon, "why Francis will tell me such stories. He is only five, you know, and he simply will not tell the truth. Only last night I had to punish him severely, and I sent him to bed without his supper, too; but nothing seems to do any good."



Just then little Marion, three years old, leaning against her mother's knee, said, "Mussa, I'se tired. I want to go home."

"Now, Marion," said her mother, "we are not going home yet; and if you do not sit still and be quiet, Mrs. Smith has a great big dog shut up in that room yonder, and he catches little girls. She will open the door and let him out if you are not a good little girl."

Marion glanced at the door indicated and then pleadingly at me, fear and apprehension written in her face. Then she sat down obediently, clinging close to her mother's skirt.

I saw my sister draw her arms a little more tightly about her four months' babe, and my own heart beat hard with indignation. I rose to my feet and held out my hand to the child.

"Come here, Marion," I said, gently. She came to me willingly, but when I turned toward the closed door, she held back.



"Come," I said, "I am going with you." As I opened the door, she caught hold of my skirt and clung behind me. Her mother, who had gone on talking about the delinquencies of Francis, and had apparently forgotten her own remark to the child, stopped a moment to say impatiently: "Go on, Marion. Don't be naughty! Mrs. Smith does not like-naughty little girls."

I entered the room and closed the door behind me. It was my own bedroom. In it were my treasures. A little child's rocking chair stood on one side of the room, and in it sat a big blue-eyed, flaxen-haired dolly that had been loved by a little girl just

Marion's age. She had left it there one day just a few months ago when she had come to me with flushed face and hot little hands, and said : "Muvver, me wants you to take se baby. Me hurts."

The measles, unquarantined in our little town, had taken all that I had, my only one.

Marion stopped just inside the door, and her eyes swept the room. They fell upon the dolly, and after the manner of children, she forgot everything else. Her lips framed a delighted, "Oh!" as she went down on the floor beside it.

I watched her for a minute, and then went back into the other room, leaving the door open.

"Mrs. Weston," I said, "there is no dog in the other room. Look at Marion."

She glanced toward the child, and exclaimed: "Oh, what a lovely doll! Marion," she called, sharply, "be careful! If you break the dolly, Mrs. Smith will punish you."



In sheer desperation I got up and shut the door. My sister half frowned and half smiled, as she shook her head at me. But I would not be warned.

"Mrs. Weston," I said, sitting down near her, "you say that Francis tells you untruths. Do you know that you have twice told Marion untruths in the last five minutes?"

She flushed, whether with anger or shame I could not tell. I refused to hear my sister's rebuking, "Why, Ruth!" and went on with my self-appointed task, determined that if word of mine might make it possible Francis and Marion should have a chance to grow up truthful children. She defended herself weakly, with, "Oh, well, it is such a nuisance to have them always bothering me so!"



"Mrs. Weston," I said, "I would give all the years of peace and quiet that I expect to have if my own little girl could bother me again. But I would rather have her where she is now than to have her grow up to tell untruths --lies-- that I had taught her. You sent Francis to bed without his supper," I went on, feeling that now it was win or lose, "when after a day of play and exercise he needed the physical nourishment, and his little body was made to suffer because of a wrongdoing for which you were responsible. Just now you not only told Marion an untruth, but you put into her heart a sense of fear, which should be a thing absolutely unknown in a child of her age. Her quick response to the suggestion proved that it was not the first time that she had been quieted in that way, and you have probably already had trouble with her in the way of nervousness and needless crying at night when she awakens in the dark. When she gets a little older, she will find that the black dogs and the bears are not where you have said; she will realize that you have told her untruths in order to gain your own end, and the perfectly logical conclusion that the telling of untruths is *not* wrong will affect her whole life and character.

Or perhaps the result will be one that will make great sorrow for you; she will realize the wrong, and will put her mother down on the wrong side of the scale. More than that, you have overdeveloped the instinct of fear, and the effect will remain with her. Often when I see a child timid, and perhaps in consequence made unhappy under the taunt of a comrade, who, in the ignorance and scorn of childhood, calls, 'Coward, coward,' I think, 'That child's mother told him lies.'"



We talked long and earnestly. Marion was happy with the doll, and my sister had slipped away to lay her babe on the bed for the afternoon nap, when Mrs. Weston rose, and said: "I am very grateful to you, Mrs. Smith. My children shall not learn to lie from me."

Word Glossary

Apprehension--dread

Indignation--anger aroused by by something perceived as unjust

Delinquencies-- misdeeds

Desperation--the condition of being rash, frantic, or hopeless

Nuisance--a bother, something that annoys