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A Plain Story of Plain Folks

Lizzie M. Holmes

1906

Somewhere at the head of the long, dusty, noisy room a bell rang out, the big wheel slowed up, the sewing machines on the long tables ceased their clatter and the new silence seemed to settle down with a startling emphasis on ears accustomed for so many hours to a ceaseless din and turmoil. It was hot, suffocating unwholesome, and the very air seemed to reek with weariness and lassitude. The hands were too tired for their usual banter and chaff as they passed one another, but piled up their work and hurried away in silence.

Mary Kent, "the little old maid," as they called her, who sat in a farther coiner, folded up the garment in her lap, smoothed back her gray-streaked but wavy locks wearily and sighed. She felt unusually depressed and tired, and her head ached. As a general thing she sang at her work and always had a smile for any passing comrade, or a cheery answer to any greeting. But tonight she was silent and seemed very sad. She was middle aged, plain, poor, little and lame and lonely, but her deep blue eyes held a soft, tender light that made her attractive even yet.

She slowly made her preparations for home, giving a glance now and then toward the open door of the pressing room through which the heated air could be seen quivering

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out into the larger room. The men were still working, the sweat streaming down their faces, necks and arms from which their thin undershirts were turned away and rolled up as far as possible. Mary passed the door and looked in. A thin, bent, oldish-looking man, with light sandy hair straggling over his head, and neck, kindly eyes, stood near the entrance. He barely glanced upward as Mary stopped, though a close observer could see by the tremor of the hand that flipped the big, hot iron, that he was disturbed: but he only worked away harder than before.

“Good night, Ben,” she said with a lurking tenderness in her voice.

“Good night, Miss Mary,” he answered meekly.

“It is very hot tonight, isn’t it? Do you feel it badly?”

“It is hot; but I’m standing it very well.”

“I’m glad. Well,” lingeringly, “good night. Ben.”

“Good night.” Mary passed slowly on her way, looking back regretfully at the man bent so patiently over his toil. She had hoped he would say more to her or look at her with a little of the old interest, but—this was all.

No one would have dreamed of a romance between two such commonplace, plain, hard-working people. They were no longer young, they were shop drudges, poor, without leisure and apparently without imagination. Yet there had been feelings between them which had blessed and saddened the long years behind them, experiences, hopes, fears, disappointments, that had made their lives richer and fuller, though heavier with sorrow than if they had not been.

Twelve years before Mary came to the shop to find work a cheery, hearty girl of twenty-three, whose hardships had failed to quench her spirits or cool her courage and determination to win life’s battle bravely. She had been well raised, but her father had died when she was fifteen and her education unfinished. When his affairs were settled it was found there was very little left for his widow and child. Something had to be done,

floor. A neighbor found her there later in the day. Word was sent to the shop and a doctor called in. Ben himself came to the house as soon as he was free, and though she did not know him, he sat at her bedside a long time. He had a nurse sent in and obtained a first-class physician and told them to get her whatever she needed.

Ben had not fallen heir to a fortune, but he had been saving every cent possible, living on next to nothing, knowing that some time he might have enough money to make Mary comfortable outside the shop, and then he would dare ask her to forgive him and take him back. Now that Mary needed care he spared nothing, though it would leave him as poor as at first. She was ill several weeks, and Ben devoted himself outside work hours to seeing that she was, properly cared for. And it was due to him that at last she woke from the long fever, sane, hopeful, but very weak. And then at last they came to understand each other and Mary never went back to the shop again. They are still poor, of course, but quietly happy and content.

and Mary's mother set up a dressmaker's shop, taking Mary from school to help her. For seven or eight years they made a tolerably good living, and then Mrs. Kent's health failed. She became an invalid and Mary did not feel competent to carry on the business alone. But she must do something and as she knew nothing so well as sewing she applied to the first large clothing establishment of which she could learn and went to work. She had remained in her own particular corner ever since. Her slight lameness was caused by an accident when a child; she did not suffer from the injury and only when she tried to hurry was it perceptible.

Ben Seaver had not been long in the place when Mary came; he noticed her one morning, standing back hesitatingly with her hands full of collars and seams to press, while other girls' crowded in ahead of her. Mary was not shy, but simply good-natured and disliked to push her way among the others. Ben saw that she waited much longer than usual—for men and women working for dear life "by the piece," have no time for politeness—and presently contrived to find a place for her near his table. She thanked him and he responded kindly, which little episode led to further conversation. It came to be the ordinary thing for her to come to his table to do her pressing and gradually they became quite well acquainted, finding much in each other to like. After a time they looked for each other at the noon hour and ate their cold bread and meat with tin cups of tea made on the pressers' stove, together, while they told each other little histories of commonplace troubles and joys. They were quietly happy together and if one for any reason were absent, the day seemed long and tiresome to the other. They nearly always walked the long three miles to Mary's home together, Ben coming nearly two miles out of his way to do so. But they cared nothing for long walks so long as they were together.

Ben was the first to realize how dear the little woman had become to him. It was one day when Mary had remained at

home because her mother was worse than usual; and it occurred to him all at once how terrible life would be if he were never to see Mary again. Then he began to calculate how far his wages would go with two people in his little garret room instead of one.

He resolved to tell her of his love and ask her to marry him, even though they were both so poor. And the next evening on their way home he managed to stammer out his meaning so that Mary understood. She was so happy at first to know that Ben cared that much for her that at first she did not remember how impossible it would be. There was her invalid mother who was accustomed to little luxuries, to obtain which Mary willingly deprived herself of many necessities. But as Ben's wife she could not do this—indeed she could not burden him with her sick mother at all. They had their little dream of happiness for about one-quarter of an hour, and then Mary told him they could not marry. It was of no use to urge her—she must take care of her mother and she could not have him undertake the support of all three of them. “For, of course, Ben, when you marry you will want your wife to stay at home and keep house and so my wages would disappear.”

He could say nothing to alter her mind. “But, you know, Ben, we can always be the best of friends and will see each other every day.”

“See each other! But how? Only in the dirty, old shop where we both toil so hard, or on the sidewalks.”

“Now, I will not let you groan over our conditions tonight. Let's be as happy as we can. You may come in tonight and see my mother and have a cup of tea together and think of nothing but joy.” And Mary laughed with her blue eyes sparkling, so that Ben could not be very miserable.

And so they worked and waited for a long time content with knowing they loved and were loved, seeing each other in the shop, on the way home, and occasionally on Sundays or of an evening when Mary's mother felt strong enough for company—

and he did not care to live, and merely did so because like all workers, as long as work held out he must stay and do it.

Mary thought Ben would get over his gloom and coldness in time, but as the weeks and months rolled on he did not change. He never spoke to her only in brief answer to what she said. He never tried to be near her or to walk with her or do her any little favors as in the old days. And so, presently, she began to think that because they were growing old Ben had no love for her. “No doubt, I am old and faded and homely and he feels worn and tired and there is no romance in his soul any more; and I am so commonplace and he has known me so long, it is impossible for me to interest him again.” Then she grew cold and polite and for a long time they seemed to drift further and further apart.

On this day, two years had passed away since Jennie died. Mary had felt a lonely longing to talk over old times with Ben and wished so deeply that they might at least be friends with no vague barrier between them. So when she spoke to Ben so kindly it was with the hope that something would come of it—that somehow they might find each other's hearts and be comrades once more. But she went home sadly and for the first time since her mother died sat down in her lonely little room and cried—cried without a bit of work in her hands, though there was plenty of it to do. If she had been a rich girl she would have known that what she needed was a rest, a vacation, a trip to the woods, where Nature might speak to her and soothe her. Those who really do little to weary themselves do not dream of doing without the summer trip and rest, but the poor toilers whose days are spent in heat, dust, ugliness, suffocation, dare not stop. During the usual vacation period they must work harder than ever, for it is “out of season,” the only work they get is the cheapest kind of “slop work” and they must do more of it in order to live at all.

Mary awoke with a burning fever in the morning. She tried to get up and go to work, but only staggered and fell to the

be her friend, and the poor, lonely, discouraged girl immediately threw herself and all her burdens on this helpful friend who came in such timely manner and seemed so strong.

Mary devoted herself to the sick woman and her baby as she had devoted herself to her mother as long as she lived. But she avoided Ben as much as possible. She, never went to the house when he was there, and gave him no opportunity to talk to her

in the shop. She was pleasant and friendly when they chanced to meet, but there was no more of the old charming, comradely intimacy, no little confidences, no sentiment or affection. Ben believed that she scorned him and after while accepted her attitude toward him as a just punishment, meekly and without protest.

Three years more of this toilsome, monotonous life passed away, and more of the strength, youthfulness, health and vitality of the hands went into the “products” of the great clothing establishment—the firm was growing rich, their workers poorer and poorer. Mary was past her girlhood now, and nothing bright or relieving beamed forth for the future. She merely did her work, helped Jennie Seaver, cheered her comrades, all with a calm, unvarying patience and sweetness that nothing seemed to affect. One day Ben’s wife took very sick and after a week’s illness died. They mourned for her of course, for she had been a gentle, dim little woman with no bad faults. But Mary felt as though a great burden had rolled from her shoulders, and after a little began to be more like her old self, laughing and singing quietly throughout the long day, with the old, happy light in her-eyes. She had done all she could for Jennie, and never wished her away, but now that it was over, she was glad.

But Ben grew more and more apathetic, dull and morose. He seemed to feel that he had been a failure in every way. He could not even take care of his little boy, who had been sent to an orphan asylum. He had forfeited all right to Mary’s love

for their home consisted of two small rooms and the mother’s convenience was always studied as far as possible.

But Ben, after a time, grew impatient. He often urged Mary to marry him though they would all be poor together—he would do everything in his power for her mother. But Mary was firm. He might feel willing now to take this extra burden on his shoulders, but Mary had seen such undertakings before and knew that Ben might some time under the stress of poverty, repent of his bargain and make both their lives wretched. It was her duty to care for her mother, but not Ben’s. Then he declared he would go away—to the country, or to the west, or to mining regions—anywhere that more money might be made, and their union be rendered possible. Mary did not object. Her heart sank at the thought of the shop without Ben in it. but perhaps after all it was the best thing he could do. The prospects of a poor presser in a cloak factory could never be bright and surely there was something better in the world for Ben.

At last the man made up his mind to go. He would come back in a few years at most with money enough to set up a cozy home, and then they would be very happy together. But Mary told him not to consider himself engaged. If all came out well and he came back to marry her they would be thankful and happy, but if he considered himself bound it might hamper his actions and he could not do as well. But he vowed to be true to her and was very sorrowful at bidding her good bye.

Mary worked on, cheerful, patient and smiling, never complaining or showing by her manner that she was ever lonely or sad. At first Ben wrote quite regularly, which was a difficult thing for him to do as he had had little practice in letter writing. He tried several things, farmed one summer, worked on the railroad, and finally found his way to the mines of Colorado. There his letters grew fewer and at last ceased altogether.

Four years went by and Mary still worked and waited and hoped to hear again from Ben. Her mother became worse and

she had to leave the shop to stay with her. But she could not be idle or devote herself to her mother alone. There were no vacations, no trips to the sea shore, or to the mountains for rest, recreation and health for her and her mother. Idleness meant pennilessness, and so Mary took home such cheap work as the firm allowed to go out, and worked by the bedside of her mother, pausing only to administer to her wants when absolutely necessary. But she talked to her or sang, and at all times smiled, to keep the poor mother's spirits up through the long, hot, tiresome days. At last she died and Mary was alone. The neighbors had helped her all they could, but they were all poor and there was little to be done in their humble home of straitened means. But Mary felt thankful and responded with kindly affection to all their efforts. She had not a cent left when finally her mother was laid to rest in the "poor corner" of the city cemetery. She gave up the little place that had been their home so long and rented a little hall bedroom, where her cot, a table, a little oil stove, her trunk and a pine box for a cupboard, constituted her furniture.

She lived her life of loneliness and toil brightened by her own determination to be cheerful, for two years more. Then one morning when she went into the pressers room with her work there stood Ben at his old table working as though he had never been away. She caught her breath and one hand clutched tightly at her heart. He did not see her until, presently, regaining her self-control, she went boldly up to him and spoke.

"Why, how do you do, Ben? And when did you get back?"

He started, turned pale and then grew redder than his sandy hair.

"Mary! It's Mary, isn't it Gad, but it is good to see you again. I got back to the city yesterday and came for my old place early this morning."

"Then you did not get rich out west?"

"No, things went bad with me the further west I got. The mine work was too hard for me and finally I took sick—was

pretty bad and all the money I had saved up was gone in no time. Then I couldn't catch on again nowhere, and I got so hard up that this old job in the pressers' room looked mighty good to me. So I made my way back."

"I'm glad to see you, Ben. It is good to have you back here in the shop and it doesn't matter to me if you are as poor as when you went away."

A glad light shone in Mary's eyes as she looked up at Ben with something of her old tenderness. He shuffled his feet and seemed embarrassed and awkward.

"Yes, an' there was another reason why I had to get to work. Say, Mary—I'm—I'm married. I got my wife in the mining district—she was a poor, little drudge in the boarding house where I was taken sick, and she nursed me and took care of me as good as she could, and when I went to come away cried so hard I hadn't the heart to leave her, so I brought her away and married her, poor as we was and poor as we've been since. She's a good little thing, an' of course I'm fond of her—but, she ain't you, Mary—" Mary's eyes shone tragically out from a white face as she hurriedly interrupted.

"Hush, hush, Ben. It's all right. I'll be her friend and yours, too."

"God knows we need you, Mary. I know I ain't used you right—but what could I do? Minnie's sickly and the baby is a little puny thing—"

"I'll go and see her. Don't think about me, Ben. Of course, I could not ask you to wait for me forever. I must go now."

How Mary crushed back her hopes, for she had remembered that "now she was free," the moment she saw Ben, how she smoothed the sorrow out of her face and brought back the old cheerful smile, we can only hurriedly relate. She went to see Ben's wife and found her a thin, timid little thing who might have been pretty under better conditions, in a poverty-stricken room with a sickly baby in her arms, comfortless, disorderly and miserable. Mary made her understand that she meant to