



A Type

Lizzie M. Holmes

1902

The slaves of slaves—can there be any greater depths of misery?

The story I have to tell to-day is of a commonplace little woman who would attract no one's attention for beauty, accomplishment or ability, who is merely a type of her class, and whose sorrows illustrate a principle.

Martha Westcott had once been a simple country girl, pretty in a fresh, youthful way, and was married when but sixteen to a neighboring country boy who had learned the carpenter's trade, preferring it to his father's occupation—farming. He had cherished some ambitions which he believed could be carried out in the city, and as this was but two or three years after the great Chicago fire and workers were in demand there, he found ample excuse to go. They established a home there, work was plenty, they laid up some money and were quite happy for a couple of years. But Joe Westcott worked too hard and when sickness attacked him his frame was too much exhausted to withstand it; a short, sharp struggle for life and he was conquered. Martha was left a young widow with a baby girl a year old, almost a child herself, a stranger in a great city, alone. Inexperienced and grief stricken as she was, the little money left her did not last more than a year and she realized that she must

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work to support herself and child. Her father was dead, her mother growing old and the two brothers left on the farm could barely wrest a living from their few mortgaged acres, so she could not turn to the home folks for help. She had always been “bandy with her needle” and she saw that she must depend upon her needle as a weapon with which to tigh the “wolf from the door.” But how?

She could not leave her baby all day alone to go and work in any of the down town establishments—she would not be allowed to take it with her. She made some inquiries of the few acquaintances she had made and found that not far from where she lived there was an elderly person, a dark and not agreeable looking man who brought work from the large manufacturies and let it out to women who were willing or so hard pushed that they had to work for what he was willing to pay. As she had no machine she could not take work home with her as some of them did; but the man did not object to her bringing her little girl provided she did not get into mischief or bother the other workers. So she rented a sewing machine of the “sweater” and agreed to come to work the next Monday. This on Friday and on Saturday she scrubbed and cleaned her little home, cooked and baked and mended up her own and the baby’s clothes, and rested on Sunday to prepare herself for her new work. It was the last Sunday’s rest she enjoyed for many a long weary day.

At the shop, which was a long, low-ceiled basement room lower than the street, she was shown to a corner which was henceforth to be hers. It was not far from the window and a sewing machine, a box and a chair stood there, and presently a boy brought her a bundle of calico wrappers already cut out. She had brought a little stool for Minnie, a simple picture book and a rag doll; the demure little girl took her seat dutifully, thoroughly imbued with the idea that she must “be good and as still as a little mouse.” Mrs. Westcott found that the price paid for the wrappers was \$1.15 per dozen. She sat and looked aghast at the flounces, ruffles find biased pieces which she must work into shape for that pitiful sum! Why, she had once made a wrapper for their landlord’s wife, with no more work

“At first, for an honorable woman, but we have been deceived.”

“I give you fair warning to pay this woman decent wages now, and this will be the last of this matter. If not you will be sorry.”

The woman only began to denounce them and ordered them out of doors, and they deliberately did so.

A letter appeared in one of the leading dailies concerning this woman and asking that patrons avoid a woman who got her work done for nothing out of poor desperate women who so needed work that they had no time to investigate matters. Two weeks after her signs were down and the place was deserted, no one knew exactly why, but she left.

Some happiness always comes into the lives of the poor, through their struggle seldom ceases for a day. The acquaintance thus begun ripened into affectionate regard, and the young man is trying to win poor Martha for a wife. She is still sewing, trying to drive with desperate haste the wolf from the door, but will no doubt become a homekeeper instead. But be sure she will never forget the “sweat shop victim,” the poor “slave of a slave.”

Martha went out in company with the girl and her brother. They exchanged confidences and told one another where they lived. The girl agreed to go with her when she went after her money, and the young man said he would see that she got it.

On Monday the following Martha did not go to work. She well-deserved and needed a day's rest with her baby, but she could not afford it for she was out of money and in debt. On the evening mentioned the young girl she had met came to her loom and they started away together leaving Minnie with a neighbor, who had been thus kind before.

After considerable difficulty they succeeded in being shown to "the madame" and this lady in half undress, immediately shoved \$3 into her hands and said "she was so busy and—"

"What is this for?" asked Martha, sharply.

"Why, your wages, to be sure."

"This for two weeks' work, twelve long days?"

"Well, really, that was all you were worth to me—you know you are not an experienced dressmaker."

"If I had not a little child who must be fed, I would throw this in your face."

Madame blazed up, her eyes and cheeks aglow.

"You dare to talk to me! You get out of here, you—you huzzy."

Martha's companion stepped between her and the woman. "You remember," she said, "what my brother said to you. Be a little careful how you abuse girls because they must work for a living. There are unions in this city who take the part of defenseless sewing girls. Be careful how you act, or your establishment will soon be a thing of the past."

"You threaten? I'll call the police! I'll have you arrested! Clear out of here, you"

"You have offered me 25 cents a day. In one afternoon I made a skirt that I saw you get \$5 for."

"Will you pay Mrs. Westcott \$1 a day for her work here?"

"I will not. I wonder what you take me for?"

on it than these would require and had been paid \$1.25 for the one. How could she live at all, she wondered. But one of the old hands told her she would get the knack of turning them off fast after two or three days and she could make enough to last her "through the dull season."

It was yet spring time and the weather still cool and fresh. The workroom had recently been cleaned and whitewashed—probably the proprietor hadn't stood in with the inspector, or had kept so marvelously dirty a place that something had to be done with it. At first the place and the work were not so bad. While little Minnie sat on her stool big-eyed and solemn and gazed at her surroundings, studying the faces and movements of those about her, or pouring over her book or nursing her doll, Martha carefully assorted her pieces, and with great pains and nicety fitted the parts together until one of the garments was finished; the examiner smilingly accepted it, as well she might. Martha had worked over two days, forming a garment for which she received a fraction over ten cents!

This would never do, she reflected. She thought she had worked fast, and she certainly had idled no time away. She spent a little time in watching the other women and learned something. The next bundle she opened she took out the sleeves of all and made them, then other parts, etc., she oiled her machine well, made the stitch long and rather loose, and instead of basting bias piece, piping and ruffle together into place, she put them all under the feed together, turned down edges as best she could as she worked, trusting to luck to get them somewhere near what they ought to be. You can see how it is done, my lady readers, if you will examine any factory made garment you may have access to, but don't blame the working girls, for they scarcely live by toiling twelve and fourteen hours a day. Mrs. Westcott would have delighted in making her work pretty and perfect; it made her sick to look at the work on the next three which she made in two days. But William Morris said "the poor have no time to be artistic," and it is all too true.

Still, this was not working swiftly enough. She found that some of the women made four, five and even six wrappers a day, and she determined that what others could do she could accomplish. She began at seven in the morning, having to get up at five to do so, trained her muscles to move more swiftly than she had ever supposed possible, to never lose a motion, to never look up, running her machine up to its full capacity, and finally succeeded in accomplishing the feat of making four of these finished wrappers in a day. The buttonholes, were made on a machine by another machine in human guise, but she must sew on buttons; don't wonder then that buttons fall off when you touch them on a ready-made garment.

But poor little Minnie! She grew tired of calling softly to mamma, "Look, mamma, des' a minute," and so sat patient, silent and pathetic, all day long, sometimes fitting bright scraps of calico together "workin' lite mamma," sometimes giving her doll kisses and caresses she longed for from her mother, and occasionally laying her cheek against her mother's dress for a few minutes. Sometimes in the afternoon she dropped from her stool to the floor asleep. Then mamma had to pause long enough to put a roll of work under her head for a pillow and compose her body as comfortably as she could, on the bare floor.

But the hot summer days came on apace. The shop grew dusty and dirty, and more dusty and dirty every day, and the air closer, hotter and more odorous. It seemed harder each day for the workers to "get up speed" when the sun poured in through the uncurtained windows and the unscreened door while the flies drearily buzzed around and settled on their sweaty necks and faces. Minnie began to droop like a flower. Her delicate pink cheeks which had been so plump and beautiful became thin and white and the blue veins showed all too plainly through the transparent temples. She ate scarcely anything and could not be tempted by the plain food her mother was able to get for her. One day she slipped to the floor suddenly and lay there very still. Her mother hurriedly picked her

So she came back and worked the next week without bothering the lady. She noticed that old girls kept disappearing and new ones coming and that loud words were sometimes heard coming from behind the closed door, and that girls came out looking angry, sullen or despondent according to their natures. She also had noticed that the card advertising for new hands continually remained in the window, below stairs. But she said nothing until another Saturday night came. Then she met with the same excuse and hurried apology. But she stood her ground more firmly this time. "I must have some money," she exclaimed. "I have gone in debt and must pay. I have a little girl who cannot go hungry. You must pay me something if you can't tell how much I have earned. "I cannot do it, I tell you; come next Monday night; I am never so harrassed on that night," and then Martha found herself being literally pushed out of the room and the door closed upon her. She met upon the threshold the same young woman she had seen leaving the place crying two weeks before, and with her a stalwart young man with a handsome and determined looking face. They were presently admitted behind the closed door and she thought she would linger in the now deserted work room and see how they fared. She heard voices, a low smooth bass voice mingling with a shriller one, but very soon they came out and the girl was putting some money in her purse. They noticed Martha's wistful looks and came toward her. "Does she owe you, too?" asked the girl in a friendly tone. "Yes, for two week's work, but she claims she is too busy to settle with me." "An old trick of hers," said the young man. "That is the way she gets her work done—keeps a standing advertisement for hands and keeps each one as long as she can without paying her, without telling what she will pay or pays so little that the girl cannot remain. The worker finally gets discouraged, goes away and never receives a cent. She shall be shown up. I mean to write to the papers about her and if ladies wish to do a good turn for the working girls, they will cease to patronize her."

but she was soon speaking as sweetly and smilingly as though she could never be excited.

“Oh, yes, she could have work, certainly,” she said, “What could she do?” and Martha answering that “she had done all kinds of sewing” seemed to satisfy her. What did she pay? “Well, that depended; she paid all one was worth to her; some accomplished so much more than others. She might come for a week and try it. A little girl? Well, she could do no harm, if she could keep her out of mischief she might bring her and let her sit in a corner beside her.” So it was arranged and Martha quite pleased at the prospect of earning better wages and working less hard went home to finish up her last linen ulster.

Martha found the change pleasant at first—there was more going on, the girls were allowed to talk if not too loud, and some of them seemed attractive and pleasant. Visitors often came to see how their dresses were progressing. Minnie seemed pleased and sat demurely as ever on her stool in the corner, but with wide open eyes and ears. But it was all hurry and bustle after all. Martha had to come back to her old habits of neatness and painstaking, but she discovered that great haste was expected of her. The girls, she noticed, took but ten minutes for lunch and did not quit work until half-past six, though they were supposed to stop at six. On Saturday Martha waited to get a chance to speak to her employer as she saw no signs of a general pay hour. She wanted to know how much she had earned and to get it as she needed it to pay room rent and for food. “Oh, yes,” the hurried mistress says, “but I really cannot tell you to-night. I haven’t made out yet just what you have done, and I have thousand things to attend on Saturday evening. Please come to work next week and as soon as possible I will attend to you. I’ou are a good accommodating woman, I know, and will not bother me to-night,” and she was gently pushed out of the room feeling almost guilty that she had annoyed the hurried woman when she was so busy.

up and held her to her breast—she was not asleep. For the blue eyes were half open and her chin fell helplessly with the blue lips open.

“My God! I am killing my child just to make a bare living!”

A woman hastened forward to help her, and she went after a cup of water. With chafing her little hands, wetting the forehead and pouring a little between her lips, they brought her to consciousness presently.

“Rock me, des’ a minute, mamma,” she murmured and nestled her face close to her mother’s breast.

A pang of sharp agony pierced that mother’s bosom. Her baby needed her—she might die and she could not take her where the fresh air blew and flowers and trees rustled and murmured of courage and hope. To cease that terrible toil meant pennilessness, even for a week. But she must take her baby home for that day at least, and she began to gather up their few belongings. Then the elderly man who run the shop came in and noticed her silting idly with her baby lying white and still in her lap.

“Why, what is the matter, Mrs. Westcott? Oh, your baby sick?” He looked at her disagreeably and sharply for a moment.

“Say, I will send you home in a carriage, you stay at home and take care of her. I will see that you have what you need.”

Scarcely comprehending this unlooked for kindness, dazed and troubled, Martha passively accepted and carried Minnie to the carriage when it came and got in with her. A doctor arrived soon after they reached home and left some medicine for Minnie, and more wonderful still, later in the day a grocer called and left fresh fruit and vegetables; and a butcher called and left some tender young lamb for a stew. Mrs. Westcott wondered but felt so concerned and anxious for her child that she didn’t try to realize what it all meant.

But that evening her employer called; he looked unusually fine, and the smile with which he greeted her made him more disagreeable than ever. He inquired about her child, sympathized with her loneliness and the necessity of her working so hard; in spite of her coldness and silence he seemed determined to remain, and it be-

came a problem to Martha how she was to get rid of him. But at last as she seemed absorbed in her sick child he suavely took his leave, telling her "not to worry, that he would be a good friend to her." But the next day he came again and he was much more difficult to deal with. Martha could scarcely escape his kindness and by the time she had managed to get him to leave on the plea that her baby needed quiet and rest, she was trembling and weak with fear. She had not dared to be stern and severe as he had been so kind to her little girl and perhaps he meant disinterested friendship only. But she made up her mind that day, for Minnie was much better. She left her with the landlady for a couple of hours, went out and found another room, a furnished one with a tree in sight and a little square of backward grass on the east side of the house where Minnie could sometimes play. The next morning she carried Minnie in her arms with a basket slung over her side and thus "moved away" to her new abode. She dared not hire a wagon to take her things for fear she would be tracked. She was to come back for more of her personal belongings, but the few articles of furniture she possessed, she left to pay a small indebtedness to her landlady.

As soon as Minnie was well enough to be left to herself a little, Martha again started out to work. She had but a few pennies left; there was a small sum coming to her at the old shop but she would not go back after it. Besides she declared to herself, she would pay all that that terrible man had spent for her somehow, some day, at any sacrifice short of starving Minnie.

After some fatiguing and anxious search she found a place where they would allow her to take home linen dusters to make at 25 cents a piece, these to be made with plenty of stitching around the edges, the pockets, sleeves, lapels and straps, and plenty of big pearl buttons to sew on. She rented a second-hand sewing machine and had it sent to her room, and so commenced the hard fight with the wolf again. Her machine would cost her half a dollar a week, her room one dollar, and nothing but those dearly earned

quarters to pay that with and to buy food enough of some kind for herself and Minnie.

She made poor headway at first. When she found that she had completed but two in three days she fell into a sort of panic. Her little girl would be out in the street homeless at that rate in a short time. She tried in such frenzy to make greater speed that she accomplished nothing. Then collected herself, grew calm, and prayed for strength and fortitude, examined her work more closely to see where she could gain time, and after a few days' experience found she could manufacture a little more than three a day. When she earned \$4 a week she felt quite wealthy and Minnie could have to eat whatever she wanted. But she accomplished this by working all the daylight hours with an incredible swiftness, without looking away from her work for a moment. She took no time to talk to or pet poor little Minnie, and as for joys or recreations for herself, she ceased to dream of them. She was forgetting all she ever knew, she had no time for friendships and she was becoming a mere machine out of which her employers reaped profits. Well, what else are the poor *for*?

One evening she ventured to steal a little walk around the block with Minnie; it was too dark to sew and it did not pay to burn a lamp. Usually she worked about the little room at this hour of the day, but to-night she felt extravagant with time and dissipated to the extent of idling for thirty minutes. In a street beyond her home she saw an advertisement in a window for hands in a dressmaker's shop. She reflected that dressmaking paid better than ready made garments and resolved to try there for work. She entered and asked to see the person who wanted help. After sometime spent in waiting she was shown to a door which opened as she approached to let out a young girl who, as Martha could see, was weeping. This did not seem very encouraging but she went on. A lady stood near the table, with brilliant black eyes and a stylish figure rather showily dressed; she looked angry and excited when Martha first saw her