

Her Life for Labor

Lizzie M. Holmes

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“But a man must succeed for himself first—before he can help others to any extent. What can a poor, obscure, struggling young man do for the cause of labor, or any other cause? When he has acquired some wealth, influence and position, he is better able to make his efforts felt. The wiser way is to devote one’s self to gaining a sure, permanent position, then one can work to some purpose.”

The young man spoke earnestly, his restless movements showing his energetic, forceful nature. The young woman sitting at the table with her chin resting in the palm of her hand, smiled dubiously, almost sadly, at the well-built, handsome young fellow who looked as though he might accomplish anything he undertook.

“By that time one will have lost the desire to work for a ‘cause.’”

“Not necessarily. I can work for my own success, and still keep the nobler object in view. I can remember always that the wealth I gain is consecrated to a good cause, and when the right time comes I shall be as ready to devote myself to the people as—as you are now.”

“I feel that you really believe this. But there is need among the people for our best efforts, now. Have the ignorant, the poor, the wage-workers, and those who have been denied an opportunity to labor, no immediate claim upon us?”

Willis Dryden seated himself in a chair nearer the table and gazed into the glowing, intellectual face of the girl whose whole life seemed wrapped up in the lot of the common people.

“I like that spirit of devotion in you, Helen; but you are too strenuous in it, you manifest too much feeling and express yourself on too many occasions with extraordinary freedom. It is casting pearls before swine. People look askance at young ladies who spend their time among the workers and the poor and entertain strong opinions. There is no honor in it, only hard work and ignominy, and you will not even have the enjoyment of seeing yourself victorious in bringing about the reforms for which you are working. It is not even worth your while, Helen.”

“Much less yours, you think,” answered Helen Estes, with a bitter smile. “But do not for one moment imagine I am working to gain the good opinion of conventional people, or that I care for honor, or glory. If I should succeed in persuading a few people to think earnestly, should inspire the workers, especially women, with better and higher desires; or help the world along a very little toward the era of co-operation, fraternity, equal duties and equal privileges, I shall feel fully repaid.” Helen’s face, softly glowing with a light of devotion and enthusiasm, looked just then very beautiful. Dryden became serious.

"I believe you, Helen. I believe you are terribly in earnest and would even die if necessary to bring about the great reforms you are working for. But, I do not think you are going the right way about it."

"You do not? What would you advise?"

"Well, look at all your hard work of writing, speaking, organizing, and distributing literature. Yet what do you accomplish? How very little it is after all, compared with what there is to do. What we need is money. A man or woman of wealth and influence can accomplish more in a day than we poor agitators can in a lifetime."

"That may be true. But there are so few rich men disposed to aid workingmen. They have no interest in helping them out of their helplessness—if they should, their occupation would soon be gone."

"But with a rich man who had been poor, who had made a study of economics, who understood the workers, whose heart was with them, as yours and mine are—the case would be different. Say we spend the next 20 years in accumulating wealth. Think, then, what we could accomplish! What object lessons we could show the world! Helen, I am as earnest as you—join me and encourage me in my efforts, work with me, and I solemnly promise that when we are worth \$100,000 I will aid you in your work with all my fortune and all my power." He leaned forward to look into the tender, grey eyes and found them filling with tears.

"I am sorry I have been so unfortunate as to pain you. I hoped to make you happy as well as myself," he concluded.

"You could make me happier than anyone else in the world, Willis—if we were not so different. You know what my life is."

"Yes, I know it only too well. You are wearing yourself out. Plunging into every labor trouble, running hither and thither, mixing in with every strike, writing, talking, listening to everybody's tale of woe—Oh, I have often longed to take you out of it all. And you get no thanks—the working people are never grateful."

"I do not expect gratitude. I cannot give up my work; and I realize that you cannot have your wife leading such an existence."

"Oh, Helen! You cannot mean this. I have been thinking so deeply on this subject lately, my heart is set upon taking you away from the whole tiresome turmoil and taking care of you. I have thought how we would devote ourselves to gaining a competence, and then in our maturer years, when we are abler in every way, we will take up the work we now lay down, with greater zeal than ever, and make it much more effectual."

"We could not do this."

"Why, Helen? How often we have exclaimed, 'Oh, if we only had money!' How often have we had occasion to wish for some philanthropic rich man who could put our project into practical realization? Now, after a few years of struggle and effort, I will be just such a man as we have so often prayed for—a man who understands the working people, one who has been one of them, whose sympathies are with them, who has their cause at heart, and who, best of all, is able to carry out what his intelligence and judgment conceive."

He looked at her, eager for a favorable answer, but she only smiled sadly and shook her head.

"Willis, do you comprehend the process of getting rich? Do you know what effect this process has on the average human being? Do you know what kind of a man you will become after several years of it?"

"Why, I will be myself, I hope. What do you mean?"

“You will not be what you are today. You will be no reformer, no labor sympathiser when you become a rich man.”

“That is nonsense, Helen.”

“To gain your object, you must devote all your energies, all your faculties to your business. You must banish sympathy, enthusiasm, love for equal justice—all thoughts of the wrongs and sufferings of the common people.

“After, say, fifteen years of business life, what will you have in common with the ordinary worker? Your habits will have become fixed, your character settled. Could you possibly return to your old youthful warmth of nature, your old enthusiasms, your old sympathies?”

“But, you see, I shall always be a worker—shall probably always work harder than the men I employ. Surely I shall be fairly entitled to all I get?”

“The world will consider you so. But your hard work will be all for yourself, it will not be returning a just equivalent to society for all you take away from it. But why argue that subject today? We have been over it often before. What I feel so earnestly about now, is, that you are planning to take up a life which will so radically change your character, snatch away all your glowing sympathies for your fellow-men, and fix upon you sordid, selfish habits from which you can never break away.”

“My dear girl, you take a gloomy view of life. Every man hopes to succeed in his efforts, and not all who do so become bad men necessarily. Come, be my wife and I will show you how to face the world with a brighter countenance.”

“Willis, I can not give up the work I have undertaken. If you will work with me and help and strengthen me, I will gladly be your wife. If not—I must go on—alone.”

Willis only smiled at Helen’s solemn and determined face, for he believed he could easily overcome her objections in time. He saw that she was tired and proposed a walk in the open air to conclude with a supper at a favorite little restaurant.

But after some weeks passed, he began to see that Helen was terribly in earnest. She was a popular speaker, a writer, the companion and friend of working women. Her talents, her sincerity, her earnest devotion, as well as her quiet beauty and grace, rendered her a well-loved woman, and her kindly influence was beneficial wherever it was exercised.

He learned at last that she would never leave her chosen work. He found it much more difficult to give her up than he had supposed. He tried several times to induce her to change her determination, but in vain. Sometimes he almost relinquished the idea of devoting himself to accumulating wealth, and resolved to marry her, let her live her own way and protect and assist her. But, though he had been a public speaker and had helped to organize many of the workers, he could not endure that his wife should lead the life of an agitator, to be going hither and thither, to mingle with rough men and possess for friends and companions only the common working women who were interested in her and her work—she who was so fitted to adorn the best society.

He bought an interest in a wood-carving establishment and threw all his energies into improving the business. He constantly advanced, and in a short time was the sole owner. He was the most careful man in the world, looking after every detail, making the most of his means and never allowing a good business chance to escape him. Every year saw greater improvements and more tokens of his prosperity. He had cottages built for his employees and received good rents from them, lent money in a few cases where the need was great and the security gilt-edged. No one expected mercy from Mr. Dryden if he were unfortunate.

After five years of an unexceptionally successful business life, he married a conventional, fashionable, society lady, who filled her place with credit to herself and honor to him. He attended church with her and counted up his profits during the sermons. He went very little in society himself, but he felt a thrill of triumph when his wife scored a social success. In ten years he was called a rich man. And in fifteen he was looked up to as a great financial success and a man of wonderful influence. The \$100,000 mark had long been passed, but he was as eager after wealth as in the beginning.

But the lives of successful men do not always go smooth and even. The woodworkers of the country had now become thoroughly organized. His own men began to complain loudly of low wages, tyrannical rules and fines. He was finally visited by a committee from the union. Enraged at their audacity, he refused to give them an interview. After repeated efforts to gain a conference with him a strike was ordered, and one morning the whistle did not blow and no one entered the open doors. Not a wheel turned that day, nor for many days following.

Then, one morning there came a break in the monotony. A train came in just before daylight and several car loads of dark-browed, shuffling men alighted in perfect silence. The intention was to get them inside the walls of a factory unknown to the strikers; but the watch knew the instant the train was heard at that unusual hour what had happened, and a hurried word went round from house to house. In ten minutes the street in front of the factory was full of determined men. When the new employees approached the buildings, they were met by a crowd of the workers who stopped their progress, mingled with them and always impeded the way to the great doors. In vain the manager with his men warned them to get out of the road—they were too many and too determined.

They talked to the newcomers, and in many cases persuaded them either to go away or to join their cause.

The strikers placed a strong guard around the buildings and kept it there. Speakers had been sent for and meetings were held every night. They were educational—not a word that would incite to violence was heard. One evening the hall was crowded to the doors; a new speaker had been announced—a woman, Helen Estes.

In the midst of her lecture, when every person present hung on her lightest word, a message came that the non-union men were being taken to the factory under a strong guard of deputy sheriffs. The hall was emptied in less than five minutes.

Helen stood on the rostrum alone—she had been forgotten. She paused for a moment, then proceeded to don her hat and cloak and walk into the anteroom. She stood in the open door looking out into the deserted streets and listening to the distant sound of excited voices. A tall man emerged from the darkness and approached her. As the flickering light of a distant street lamp grew steady for a moment, she recognized Willis Dryden—older, heavier, more hard of face than the man she had known and loved—but still, Willis Dryden.

“Miss Estes, you remember me?” he said, offering his hand.

She extended her own slowly and coldly; she tried to speak but found she could not.

“Your friends have very readily deserted you,” he continued. “You see that your enemies are kinder.”

“I do not blame them, and certainly you are no enemy,” she managed to say brokenly.

“Thank you. Shall I walk with you to your stopping place? Then I suppose I must hasten to see what your friends are doing at the factory.”

“I would like to walk that way myself. You know I am as deeply interested as you can be.”

Mr. Dryden uttered a sarcastic "humph!" and started on. "No doubt," he said, "from your standpoint," and Helen fell into step with him.

"Understand, Mr. Dryden, that I deprecate violence and would regret an injury done to you or your property more than you could. But I am certain that no union man will offer you any," she said.

"You are over-confident. And you are sadly blinded to the consequences of your own preaching."

"I have heard you express very different sentiments."

"Yes, when I was young and foolish."

"But so confident that years spent in the process of getting rich would not change you or your sympathies. I remember those days very vividly, and I recall a promise you made then. You promised that when you owned \$100,000 you would devote your strength, talents and fortune to the cause of labor. I ask you now to redeem that promise. Subscribe enough money to build another factory, in which these men, who are only asking for fair wages and decent treatment may go to work co-operatively."

Mr. Dryden turned and looked at her in great astonishment.

"Your assurance is most admirable, Miss Estes. Give your people money with which to ruin me? But, of course, you can not be in earnest."

"I see. You have changed, and you will not keep your word. I do not claim that all men who set out to become rich become hardened and spoiled as to their relations to the rest of their fellow-men, but that is the general tendency, especially when they pursue any object with the intensity you did. The habit of making every move count toward the one desired result is very apt to grow and become a fixed one. Great indeed must be the nature of a man who can overcome it."

At that instant they turned the corner and came into full view of the buildings and the turbulent crowd in front. The unsteady light of the street lamps, the lanterns and flaring torches carried by the different men, threw strange lights and shadows across the scene; it seemed a weird, terrible picture taken from out the dark, mysterious past. Deputies surrounded the new men, but the strikers guarded the factory doors. A noisy, angry crowd surged about, but Helen saw few strikers among them.

Mr. Dryden pointed to the scene with emphatic finger.

"Look at your work! Is that better than peace and industry and wages? These unions, with their disturbances, are a curse to civilization. Not only to their best friends, their employers, but to themselves. Now, if this sight pleases you, I will take you to a place of safety from where you can look out."

"God pity the lot of the worker if no unions had ever existed!" Helen exclaimed as she followed Mr. Dryden to a niche between two buildings where she could not easily be discerned, but from whence she could note all that occurred. As he turned away she stopped him. "Will you tell me why, Mr. Dryden, you came after me, and why you have taken so much trouble?"

"I have not entirely forgotten the past," he answered in a low tone, and hurried away.

As yet no actual violence had been used. The strikers simply refused to move from the doors, and the deputies, many of them acquaintances and halfway sympathizers, hesitated to proceed against them. Suddenly a commotion rose in the thickest of the crowd, a shower of pebbles fell among the deputies and the men they guarded. A round of shot was immediately sent into the crowd and several men fell. A savage snarl, a great outcry, went up and the throng pushed closer to the doors. At that moment Mr. Dryden appeared on the topmost step of the platform leading

to the doorway, waving his hand as though to command silence that he might speak. No one heeded him. Sticks, clubs and missiles began to fly and the tumult grew worse.

Helen instinctively drew near. A strange, vague fear possessed her, but it was not for herself. Dryden was in danger—she felt that—but she could not have told why she had the irresistible impulse to move toward him. She had been watching the faces of some of the men—dark, threatening, terrible faces. Suddenly she flew forward and stood in front of Dryden—no one had seen her an instant before—and then a single pistol shot rang out on the air. Helen fell to the ground, Dryden sprang down unhurt. An awed silence fell upon the scene. Mr. Dryden stooped and lifted Helen in his arms. Then the leaders of the strikers crowded around to know what they could do. A doctor was summoned. They were about to carry her into some house nearby, when Helen looked up to Willis Dryden, smiled, muttered some unintelligible word and then—she was dead.

The crowd melted away. Anger and turbulence subsided, strong men wept. Womanly hands cared for the fair, cold body, and all disappeared. There remained only silence and sadness.

The strike was ended. The factory doors remained closed for weeks, but it was understood that the old men were to go back to work under better conditions when the shop started again. No one knows whether the owner who appears to have aged and changed since his life was so tragically saved will be the stern, strict master of yore, or if a better mood has come upon him.

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