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Not by Bread Alone

Lizzie M. Holmes

1902

A young woman, pale and faded, sat near the little square window of a plainly furnished room, catching the last rays of light to finish a garment from the factory in the city. When, at last, she could see to work no longer, she leaned back in her chair with her hands dropped in her lap and gazed wistfully at the one patch of sky visible to her; below it were blackened chimneys, dingy brick walls, the rubbish of back yards and broken back fences Not a flower was to be seen in any window or doorway, not a pretty curtain, or even a bird cage. It was simply sordid, ugly, dreary. The hungry look in her eyes was not due alone to the lack of nourishing food.

Presently another woman entered the room carrying a large bundle. She was older, plainer, but more cheerful and matter-of-fact. She did not seem so much out of place in the surroundings, and it was evident they did not worry her as they did her sister. Without really sympathizing, she loved and pitied her and would gladly have lightened her dreary life if she could. "Here, Alice," she said, "I found a rose that has been stepped on, but it is not badly faded or bruised, and if we put it in water it will blossom out quite pretty again."

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Mary Casey held the withered rose with its bruised stem and leaves before her sister, then placed it in a broken glass of water and set it in the window by her side. Alice smiled, a grateful, pitiful smile, and thanked her sister with a half sob.

“You make me think again of my dear little poem, Mary:

“The poor have always hunger
Not the hunger alone for bread.
But for some of the beautiful sunshine
That over the earth is spread:
For the fair, sweet things in Nature,
For the beautiful things in art,
For the light, the warmth and the music
Which softens the human heart;
For the sight of rare, old pictures.
For a breath of clearer fields,
For a touch and a scent of the roses
That a rich man’s garden yields.

....

So, in hunger for heart companions
The poor oft journey alone.
And struggle to stifle the longings
An Infinite Love has sown.”

She spoke the words tenderly and thoughtfully as she breathed in the scent of the broken flower and thought of roses she had fondled long ago. She wondered, too, if she were wicked to feel that intense longing for things beautiful and bright when it was so hard to buy food and pay the rent. To her, “the necessities of life were its luxuries.” She would willingly have sacrificed some of her best meals for the sake of a beautiful picture or any work of real art, only for her sister, who insisted that she eat enough to keep up her strength though her soul starved.

maker she would have been crushed as not being fittest to survive. Under changed and favorable conditions she bids fair to survive and bless the world with her usefulness. There are many such women pining away in dark, unlovely homes, sinking under the weight of uncongenial, continuous toil. What a pity that no Mrs. Thornton comes to their rescue.

“Yes, I know it all, dear, I understand. Now, when can you come?”

“Whenever you say, kind friend. Poor Mary! I am sorry to leave her; she has been so good to me, so patient and kind. But I am only a source of anxiety and care, and she will be happy to know I can rest and get well. I would like to see her before I go.”

“I think I will send the carriage for you tomorrow morning.”

Alice went to Mrs. Thornton’s, Mary being only too delighted that her sister would have an opportunity to rest and grow well again. At first Alice could only indulge in the luxury of complete rest, lying in a sweet, dreamy stupor, vaguely conscious of the lovely, warm, quiet room and of the proximity of kind friends, ready to provide anything that could add to her comfort, but who understood her too well to talk to her or expect her to do so. As she grew stronger and took a more vivid interest in the beauties of the place, her whole being seemed to expand and she seemed to live as she never had before. She soon became a pleasant and useful companion to Mrs. Thornton, and grew to be even more enthusiastic about helping working girls, counseling them to live wisely, helping them out of unbearable situations, organizing them and teaching them to be mutually helpful to one another.

For herself, she began a systematic course of study and though at first her longings for pencil and brush seemed presumptuous, she at length obtained them with a good instructor, and is now astonishing her friends with her remarkable progress. She is growing pretty. Her cheeks have filled out and grown rosy, her eyes are bright and expressive, and she has surprised even herself by her gay spirits, ready wit, ease and grace of expression. Mr. Graham being an intimate friend of the family, is often at the house and the two are very happy in each other’s society.

Thus was one beautiful nature preserved from the destructive power of wage slavery, by a little kindness. As a cloak-

Mary could scarcely understand the nature that could feast on beauty and become satisfied with a strain of rich music; but whenever she found it possible, she humored her sister’s poetic fancies. But in a household where the actual necessities had been for many years very difficult to procure, things of beauty were exceedingly few and far between.

Their father had been a furniture maker, endowed with fine tastes, rather feeble health and very little of that quality called “push.” Their mother had been a school teacher in her girlhood, and she also had her unsatisfied aspirations and dreams, which she crushed out by an abundance of good common sense. The father had died in their early childhood, actually worked to death, for he had been unable to endure the long hours of confinement which his work engendered. Afterward the widowed mother, in order to keep a home and have her little girls with her, took in washing and any other work she could get. The children attended school until eleven and thirteen years of age, respectively, when they obtained employment in the clothing establishment in which they still worked. Two winters afterward, their patiently toiling mother took a severe cold at her work, and not affording time to rest and take care of herself, gradually grew worse until at last the poor, worn-out woman folded her hands for the last time and entered into her eternal rest.

Mary had been endowed with her mother’s practical good sense and energy, while Alice inherited her finer qualities and all the father’s artistic tastes and tendencies. She had never been strong physically, and the hard, ugly factory life soon broke down her health; it became impossible for her to go there every day, but she would not be a burden on the sister and demanded that she bring work home for her to finish. So, day after day, shut up in their plain room, away from the great blue dome of the sky, away from trees and flowers and sunshine, poor Alice toiled on, alone, like a prisoner in a cell serving out a life sentence.

Once or twice when their father was alive they had been taken to the opera. It had been like entering into paradise for Alice, and she had lived in a dream of glorious sounds for weeks afterwards. Sometimes now, in these days of imprisonment, the old spell would come over her and she longed with a desire so strong as to be painful for one more hour in that paradise of her youth.

She would have done without food or fuel to go to a good opera, but Mary would never allow it, promising instead, that as soon as she should have a particularly good week, Alice should go, without sacrificing her needed nourishment. Mary considered it her duty to guard and watch Alice in all her doings, for if left alone she would dine off a handful of delicious fruit or a dish of ice cream and be satisfied, which to Mary seemed the height of folly. Alice was sweet-tempered and always ready to yield to her sister's better judgment, though the wistful look in the soft grey eyes often haunted Mary for hours.

The girls had lacked, since their father's death, the intellectual companionship which would have been so much to them, as well as nearly every other beautiful thing in life. Alice craved the mental and spiritual nourishment such companionship would have afforded, though she did not understand her own soul's need.

At this time some energetic work had been done by a woman organizer among the sewing women of the city. Mary and Alice had both become deeply interested and rendered some assistance by their familiarity with all the conditions of working women.

A young member of the Trades Assembly had also taken a lively interest and assisted materially in the general agitation and organization. He had occasion to call on the sisters once or twice in the course of business, and appeared to sympathize with and understand Alice from the first. He determined to encourage and cheer the lonely girl who worked away so

“Do you mind telling me something of your life and circumstances? I do not ask from idle curiosity or to humiliate you. Tell me, as you would your mother if she could come to you.”

Alice would have been hard to win into telling the sad, monotonous story of her life under ordinary circumstances; but this kindly woman took her so closely to her heart and showed so much good, motherly feeling that she could not resist her. With her tired fingers clasped in the warm, strength-imparting hands of Mrs. Thornton, she told her own history, feelings, aspirations and weariness of body, heart and brain, in simple, touching words that brought the tears to Mrs. Thornton's experienced eyes. When she had done with her pitiful tale, Mrs. Thornton said:

“I am going to take you home with me, my dear. You know perhaps that I am a very busy woman, that my work lies among the young women toilers everywhere—I believe in saving women before they fall instead of gathering up the wrecks afterward and herding them together in an establishment which stamps them ‘ruined.’ I will take you into my home and take care of you until you are well, and then you may help me with my work. I need a companion and a secretary. When you are stronger you can choose your occupation, and I will see that you have an opportunity to follow it.”

Alice bent her head and wept as she had not allowed herself to do in her most sorrowful hours. The wonderful relief as the burden of her wearisome toil rolled from her weak shoulders; the prospect of rest, of beautiful surroundings, of proper nourishment, of kindness and companionship throughout the long, long days to her worn, feeble being, broke down her usual self-control. Mrs. Thornton understood, and knew the crying would do her good and so let her alone, except to smooth her hair a little and murmur soothing words.

“What must you think of me, Mrs. Thornton, that I have no words with which to thank you, but can only break down and cry? If you knew how grateful I am—if I could only express it.”

How was he to help a poor, sick working girl without in reality injuring her? He thought of some of the ladies he had known, in better health than this woman, who had been ordered to the south, to be surrounded by physicians, nurses, servants, luxuries, instead of having to serve others day after day. He resolved that something must be done for her, and he intended to think it out by himself.

One day when Alice was feeling particularly weary and despondent over the work so much too heavy for her slender hands, something happened. She had dropped her work and laid her aching head on the table near her, while an overwhelming sense of the hopelessness of it all came over her.

Must her whole life be "imprisonment at hard labor?" For, what else had it been so far? Weariness, sickness, grief and loneliness were her visitors, and this hateful, coarse work was like an everlasting nightmare from which she could never escape. She prayed that life at such cost might not last. And then came a rap at the door. At her bidding a lady entered the room, seeming to fill it with warmth and beauty and luxury: well-dressed, large and kindly, she had the air of being accustomed to the best the world afforded. But her face was sweet, and kind and sympathetic, and her voice musical and inviting. Alice loved her the moment she spoke.

"You are Miss Alice Casey, are you not? I am Mrs. Thornton. I have heard of you and want to hear more of you. I want to lie your true friend, so do not fear to trust me. Mr. Graham knows me and would no doubt give me a character, if he were here. May I sit beside you while you work? Is this what you do day after day? Dear me! No wonder the poor little cheeks are so thin and the circle so dark under the plaintive eyes. Do you like it?"

"No, indeed, ma'am; but I must work to live, and I have had no opportunity to learn anything else. It hurts me," and she threw it aside.

patiently in her "prison cell," rather than be a useless burden on her sister. He succeeded far better than he knew.

As Alice sat gazing at the darkening square of sky she heard a step in the little hall outside. She knew to whom it belonged, for a faint flush suffused her delicate cheeks and a new light came into her eyes, as Mary opened the door to a rather timid knock. Mortimer Graham kindly greeted both, then sat down near Alice.

"I hope I find you well as usual, Miss Alice," he began, cheerily. "One does not know by seeing you, for your work is always in your hands. You accomplish more than stronger people, I believe.

"It is easier for me to always be plodding than to make great energetic efforts and then stop. I wonder would I be any better off in your ideal society, Mr. Graham, since it does not mean exemption from work, as I understand it?"

"True, Miss Alice; but you would be the last to wish that. I doubt if any one could keep you entirely idle for a whole day. If you could occupy yourself with congenial employment you would not want it taken from you, would you?"

"Oh, that would be so pleasant I should not call it work. But doing as I liked, would not be earning my living, would it?"

"If 'what you liked' produced something that somebody else wanted, certainly. I'll warrant you have abilities sufficient to add to the comfort and happiness of other people and still do only congenial things. We people of the world have learned to look upon work as some terrible curse, something to be dreaded and avoided, something that degrades and humiliates; and when we picture a millenium, we instinctively fancy it all rest and peace and idleness. But work is really mankind's greatest blessing, as work, not as drudgery or slavery.

When each one can take up work he likes, is not compelled to toil until mind, body and spirit are exhausted to the point of agony; when the worker can take an appreciative and special interest in his occupation, then will all work become idealized.

Until then no effort is artistic. There will be work for all and all will feel the impulse to work. In that day 'ye shall not sow and another reap, ye shall not build and another inhabit.'"

"It is a beautiful ideal," Alice replied, with beaming eyes; "too beautiful to ever be true! In the meantime, the fittest only can survive; and I, with other weaklings, must be sacrificed. It is the inexorable law of nature, you know."

"I think many of us entirely misunderstand that easily-spoken phrase. True, in the mighty progress of evolution the weakest do succumb first to unfavorable conditions, while the stronger survive. This does not mean that intelligent man is always to blindly submit to being crushed. Nature's law* are here to be discovered and turned to the use and welfare of mankind.

If the conditions crush out the physically weak, who have other and finer qualities useful to the world, we must change those conditions. Man is capable of doing this; plants, stones and the lower animals are not.

If, as a society, we want only strong bodies and coarse, hardy beings, we will preserve the conditions under which such beings survive. If we learn enough to desire strong minds, sweet souls and true hearts for the upbuilding of a strong, good and wise race, then we must establish conditions in which the 'surviving fittest' will be such natures."

"Do you think it possible that man can ever so greatly effect his environment?"

"I do. My belief and your belief will help to effect it. You will yet see the day when something besides brute force will survive."

"I do. I must. Of what advantage would be our superiority over the brute creation if we can not sometimes conquer our surroundings?"

They conversed further on this and other subjects for some time, then Graham took up the business which had called him

there, after which he shook hands cordially with both and departed.

Alice was quietly and uneffusively happy throughout the remainder of the day, as though she had looked upon a beautiful picture or listened to a strain of lofty music. Mary knew it by the soft, faint pink in her thin cheeks and the tender light that came into her gentle grey eyes.

Winter came on apace, and Alice's little square outlook became bleaker and uglier; only, it varied now, from a dusty brown to a glaring white which day by day grew dark and smoky until the old dusty brown came back again. She scarcely ever went out now, and her occupation, beside her homely work, was to watch these dreary changes and the patch of sky above them. She grew weaker and paler and the grey eyes more sad and wistful, but she said nothing of feeling badly, and did her work as faithfully as possible. By and by she found it impossible to complete the usual number of garments in a week and each one appeared to make her more weary than before. She smiled—a grieved-child kind of smile when she acknowledged this to Mary.

"I wonder," she said, "why I can not be put to a better use? I am a poor, broken machine for this kind of labor, but I believe I could be of use to the world at something else." Mary, sorely touched by these words, resolved that by some means Alice should be released from her distasteful toil. How it was to be brought about she could not tell, for well she knew Alice would not consent to be an idle burden as long as she could lift a finger.

Mr. Graham called once or twice during the winter and these occasions were red letter days to Alice. He remembered to bring her some flowers and a few magazines, upon which she fairly existed until he came again. Toward the last of the winter he noticed particularly how pale and weak she had grown, and his heart was heavy over the unsolvable problem.