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The ‘Dignity of Labor’

Lizzie M. Holmes

1901

In a corner of the great, dusty workroom of a large suit-making establishment, near a grimy window, sat a young woman awaiting the “starting of the steam;” not idly, for the dinner half hour was seldom all “wasted” in eating. She was sorting out pieces of cloaks and laying them together ready to be run under the greedy feeder of the machine when the wheels should begin to turn. Agatha Willis might have been handsome in her early youth, for her features were regular and her hair still waved prettily back from a low, wide forehead; but her thin form was bent, the sharp shoulder blades and elbows showed all too plainly through the cheap calico dress, and her back had taken on that long curve so common to sewing women. Her gray eyes were dull, her skin sallow, her cheeks hollow, and her lips, which still possessed a graceful curve, were dry and colorless. She seemed a mere working machine now, all beauty, grace, animation gone long ago with the youthful hopes, tender dreams, and bright thoughts that belong to girlhood.

No one was near at the moment. Most of the women had snatched the opportunity to catch a breath of fresh air at an open door ten stories above the surrounding city. In the work-

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room the dust and lint thickened the hot air, and the disorder and litter all about made it seem more suffocating than it otherwise would have been. Some one opened a door leading from the office and came out. Agatha gave a hasty glance and said to herself, "the new manager, I suppose," and continued her work. He began to look over the bundles of work lying on the machines as though to familiarize himself with the class of work being done. He was a prosperous looking man, self-possessed and intelligent and thoroughly business like. Agatha paid little attention to him until he came and stood at a machine near her. Then something familiar in his motions caught her notice. She knew him. Childhood came back again—happier days of plenty and of pleasure, and this man, then a gallant boy, her playmate and defender, appeared by her side, an imperious maiden who thought the world made for her. She wondered if he would know her now, this Ralph Trenton, who had so suddenly come out of the beautiful past into the sordid present. She bent more closely over her work and almost hoped that he would not recognize her. But he turned toward her at last and she felt his gaze upon her. Then she looked up and smiled faintly.

"It is Agatha—Agatha Willis! I cannot be mistaken." He added the last hesitatingly as though there was still a doubt.

"I am Agatha Willis. I remembered you first, Ralph Trenton," and she slowly put out a hand. He hastened to take it but a look of doubt and pain lingered on his face.

"I cannot make this seem the sunny-faced, bright, little friend and comrade of my boyhood. Agatha, has the world gone so hard with you?"

Not harder than I deserve, I suppose. I have heard it said that we all get what we merit sooner or later. Since my father and mother died my life has been work principally, and that is what we are for, it seems."

"Then it should not injure us. You look worn and sad—"

"And ignorant and awkward and coarsened, you think," Agatha added with a smile that was half bitter, half ashamed.

She suddenly became vividly conscious of her rough, needle pricked fingers, her mussed hair, her faded face and worn calico gown; she felt the contrast painfully between this cultured, cleanly, well-poised man and herself. She regretted now that she had recognized him; she must see him day after day, the other workers would look on and wonder, and he himself would not like to renew their old acquaintance—they were so different now. She resolved that she would have as little to say to him as possible. He was still looking at her with a kindly but half pitying smile.

“You have not had your rightful chance, perhaps,” he said, “but you may not have made the best of such chances as have come to you. Pardon my old time frankness, Agatha, but I must tell you about one of my hobbies. It is that honest work should not injure or degrade any one, no matter what it’s nature. That is one reason I did not choose a profession instead of this vocation. ‘Labor is noble and holy—’ you remember.”

“It might be made so, but not by the individual in the midst of this chaos of enforced drudgery and poverty everywhere.”

“Oh, you mistake! But I will see you again. We will go into this question farther, and then I want to know more of your life since I last saw you.” He bowed slightly and hurried away. The women were hastening back to their seats and the bell would ring in another half minute.

They did not meet again for several days. The forewoman of her department had noticed her conversation with the superintendent and was full of curiosity. Agatha told her she had known him formerly but nothing of the man himself or her long acquaintance with him. Her fingers flew with their accustomed, mechanical swiftness over her work, and she seldom looked up from it; but she could not entirely banish from her thoughts the man whom she had once ordered about with all the pretty queenliness of a somewhat spoiled girl of 14 or 15. She was surprised at her own sensitiveness and at the abashed feelings that had effected her. Why was it? Why had she felt

so much humiliated—so much his inferior? Had she not been industrious, honest, faithful—everything that she had always heard led to success and plenty. It had all resulted—and she realized it in that instant as she never had before—in the loss of her youth, her girlish beauty, in an uncultured mind and a plain awkward person.

One day, as she sat alone with her simple lunch in a paper on her lap, she was startled to see him coming toward her.

“How came you to choose this work, Agatha?” he asked without any preliminary greeting. “Do you like it?”

“I do not know that I did choose it. It was thrust upon me. As to liking it—I never thought whether I liked it or not—until a few days ago.”

“And now?”

“I—believe—I hate it. It has had a bad effect upon me.”

“You have allowed it to have a bad effect upon you. I believe all work is ennobling. We should dignify our toil, not let our toil degrade us. Now, I have been a very busy person ever since my boyhood and I am not dissatisfied with the results.” Mr. Trenton looked complacently down at his white hands and smiled gravely.

“What have you done?” Agatha asked bluntly, a feeling of resentment rising within her breast.

I first clerked in a clothing store, and acquired there a good knowledge of the business; we were connected with a firm in the city and I was finally sent here. By putting all my energies into my work—by liking it, in fact, I came to be something of an authority on goods of this sort. My employer liked me and treated me as a son. I have had time to study and have been encouraged to improve myself. I have been practically my own master, and I have never betrayed the trust reposed in me. I was sent for a short time ago to assume this position at a good remuneration. I have simply been faithful and have received the natural reward of my faithfulness.”

Agatha gained a new, more mature beauty in place of the youthful prettiness she had lost. She grew bright, genial and witty and her interest in her fellow workers deepened as the years went by. She was one of the busiest of women, seldom idle from early morn to the close of evening. Her husband said to her one day:

“Agatha, I do not know a woman who accomplishes more work in a day than you. Why do you not wear out, fade, grow humble and apathetic.”

“I think, Ralph, that you know why. I am happy and I am free to labor as I like. I like my work for I am interested in what I accomplish. My labor is free and that is the secret of my great content in it.” — Lizzie M. Holmes, La Veta, Colo.

her and to long for her constantly. He watched for her on the streets, at restaurants where working girls were wont to go, at labor meetings and other probable places. But for a long time she seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth.

Chicago is a great city and one often lives for years there and never meets the friend who lives a block or two away. But it is also small, as one does meet in the most unexpected place the person he least expects to see. And thus one day, as Ralph was walking moodily along a quiet street, he met Agatha face to face.

It was a surprise to both. But she was looking better; her form was fuller, her face fresher and evinced more decision and character than before. She walked with a firmer step, and to a great extent she had lost that old, wearied, apathetic, shrinking appearance. She blushed on seeing Trenton, paled a little, but soon recovered her self-possession and cordially extended her hand. He clasped it and turned and walked with her. She led the conversation into easy channels and soon they were talking as any old acquaintances might.

A close and enjoyable friendship grew up between them. They discussed again and again many phases of industrial subjects, and with much less of heat and feeling than were expressed when they met in the old factory. She had obtained work more suited to her and she had studied and thought a great deal. For Ralph's words had had their effect though she had combatted them so warmly at first. She had taken, by main force sometimes, leisure from work to rest, reflect, read and think. The worker who can never do this is the one who invariably sinks and degenerates into a clod. Often conditions are such that it is impossible—and this is one of the reasons that there is a "labor question" which "can never be settled until it is settled right."

They came to understand one another so well after a time that they did not care to separate again. They were married and a new and happy home established.

"I, too, have been faithful and have received the more common rewards of faithfulness."

"I am afraid you do not go about your work in the right spirit. I still insist there is nothing degrading in labor itself. The masses of workers are at fault for allowing themselves to become debased, subservient, dwarfed."

A flash of color flitted across Agatha's face.

"You do not seem to understand the condition of the mass of workers after all," she said. "They may be at fault—as an ox is at fault for being what he is. I am what I am, worn, ignorant, backward and disinclined to improve my mind, because I work too hard and too many hours at work I am not interested in having done, and for too little pay. This is the case with thousands of other workers. We women labor ten and twelve hours a day for our employers, then five or six in our own humble homes if we would be decent and clean. Do you expect us to do more?"

"Yes. Maintain your dignity. Love your work. Think noble thoughts."

Agatha seemed greatly agitated. "I wonder if you know," she said warmly, "what routine work is, carried so many hours each day that muscles, bones, nerves ache to distraction each with an exquisite pain of its own, with nothing to be gained by it except the sustenance to enable one to keep on with it. I am not seaming, binding, overcasting, trimming, because I want these things done; but merely that I may gain the money to keep on with the struggle. This is forced work—slavish work—drudgery—it can never be dignified. Labor can never be noble and holy—until it is free!"

Mr. Trenton smiled in an amused manner and Agatha suddenly became conscious that her words sounded rather grandiloquent.

"You should not provoke me!" she exclaimed, hotly. "You are laughing at me and at all of us, and you have no right to. You consider me your inferior—there was a time when you did

not. What wonder that we are all dolts. You have never toiled as we have, you cannot understand our lives—you never can. Go your superior way and allow us to travel our humble roads in peace!”

Agatha picked up her pieces of cloaks and turned her face firmly away. Ralph checked his first impulse to answer her, for it was near the hour for work to be resumed, and coolly walked from the room.

The days passed and the two did not meet again. Agatha had resolved to have very little to say to him; if he spoke to her she would answer him and that was all.

But this resolution did not prevent her from thinking of him. She heard his voice, saw his half-provoking smile and fathomless eyes, imagined often that she felt his presence or that he was quietly approaching with some odd, abrupt speech or greeting. She was angry with herself for it, but thoughts of him were not to be banished and she often found herself longing to catch a distant glimpse of him or hear his voice ever so far away. One evening when she had concluded that he meant always to avoid her, he came up suddenly and said abruptly:

“Tomorrow is a holiday. Will you go out on the lake with me? It is growing late for excursions but there are still some small steamers making short trips to various points. Will you go?”

The thought of a long, quiet late summer day out in the open air with no work to do, no anxiety, no care, and with Ralph Trenton, made her heart beat fast and her head whirl. But no! That could never be. She was too proud for his patronage and she would not be laughed at. He was altogether outside her little world and the sooner she put him out of her mind altogether, the better it would be for her.

“I must work at home tomorrow. I have no time to be idle.”

“That is where you are wrong. You should snatch every opportunity to rest; you can work better afterward and you will not wear out so fast.”

“I cannot go, Mr. Trenton. I am sorry, and I thank you.”

The words sounded very cold, but he did not know how close to the surface the tears lay. He only bowed and turned away.

Agatha worked harder than ever after this and she grew paler, thinner and more careworn. She could not return to her old apathy and the old calm endurance of her lot. Inwardly her life was burning up with her restlessness and unhappiness. That she must not see or talk with this man, and yet know that he was somewhere near through all the long days was torment to her. She finally determined to end it.

I have worked here for seven years and I know little of the world outside. But I will go away. I can find work somewhere else and peace once more. I cannot bear this. I cannot trust myself.”

She gathered up her few belongings, sent in her book to have her earnings made up and went out quietly with the rest, without saying goodbye to any one. She felt that she could not tell her intentions to any there.

And so Ralph Trenton lost sight of her. No one knew where Agatha Willis had gone or why. The older hands missed her very much and the forewoman resentfully bewailed her absence, because she had always been such a steady reliance and had never failed them before. But soon, to all appearances, her vacant place filled up and she was forgotten.

Ralph was astonished when he found her no more in her place in the corner, but he was so certain that she would eventually return that for a long time he would make no inquiries. Then when he began to ask cautiously worded questions, he found that she had gone away, but where, no one knew.

Then he began to feel angry that she had deliberately and completely disappeared without saying a word to him. He had purposely avoided her for a time with some vague, masculine idea that he would teach her a lesson. But it looked different to him now that he had lost her completely. He began to think of