



The ‘Slummers’

Lizzie M. Holmes

1902

Three charming young ladies sat together chatting and eating bonbons and fruit in the pretty, cosy boudoir belonging to one of them, one afternoon in early spring. Some one had quoted the saying “One-half the world does not know how the other half lives,” and pretty Miss Daisy Erwin exclaimed:

“Why can’t we learn? I want to know if there are people who live in so opposite a manner from ourselves—let us go and see them.”

Beautiful Miss Kate Durham, the hostess, thought favorably of the idea. The third young lady, older somewhat than her companions, sat at a table viewing a few water colors by an amateur and looked thoughtful over the proposition. She was not like the others—her dress was rich but quiet, and her graceful head and neck indicated a queenly nature which her kind, intellectual face belied. She spoke presently and said:

“What excuse do you make for breaking in upon people who are very busy, and staring and asking impertinent questions?”

“Oh, it isn’t necessary to have an excuse!” flippantly answered Miss Erwin. “Everybody goes slumming, you know. The slummees like it.”

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“How do you know? They are human beings and ought to possess common human right,” Miss Mabel Grey answered with considerable earnestness.

Miss Durham hastened to interpose.

“Oh, but you know, dear, we may be able to do them good. The more we learn of them the better chance we have. And they do not mind being looked at, any more than oxen would while plowing. We will get Cousin Austin to accompany us, and he can procure a policeman if necessary. Perhaps if Mabel objects to visiting the low working people, she would prefer to go and see the low, vicious people. Which shall it be, the dives or the sweatshops?”

“How is that people who really work should be so poor and low? I suppose they are paid for their work, aren't they?”

“It is called ‘pay,’ and they manage to live upon it,” said Miss Mabel, “and naturally their surroundings are miserable, and they are half nourished; but if you expect to And them all ignorant and low in their taste you will find yourselves mistaken. Some of them are ladylike, and even accomplished, but they are poor and choose rather to be honest and be robbed than to rob. The shop is a good place to hide one's sorrow in—and they can be free when the day's work is over to shut themselves in their own poor little rooms and commune with themselves undisturbed. It is the reason so many prefer the drudgery and privation of sewing shops rather than ‘go out to service.’”

“Oh, you weave quite a romantic veil about their lives, I declare. You make me only the more anxious to see them,” cried Daisy.

The party was made up for the very next day, and “Cousin Austin,” a very elegant young man who possessed some strange, misunderstood traits, had been coaxed into going with them. They dressed quite plainly for them and set out on a common street car, riding a long way to where the houses were commonplace and bare of ornament. Then they took a street a little worse looking than the others and walked until the buildings were only great ugly boxes, set on end and full of narrow holes called windows. They were very

old and looked like aged people, as they sheltered their swarms of inmates, still trying to be useful and strong as ever. The pavements were worn into great holes and hillocks, and unpleasant odors filled the air. The ladies put their handkerchiefs to their lips and looked about hesitatingly.

“Oh, this isn’t a beginning, ladies. Do you wish to go back?”

“No, no,” they exclaimed, “we want to go on.”

“I believe there are some typical sweatshops in this vicinity,” answered Austin. “I may have to make some inquiries.”

“Why did you not procure a policeman?” asked Kate.

“Well, to tell the truth, I do not like their company. And we might frighten the children, you know, with their great blue-coated presence.”

“I can’t understand you, Austin; but do you think we are safe?”

“Safe as if in your own street. People who are willing to work hard and live as these people do, will not steal of you. They would have gone the way of the thief long ago if they had not been determined to be honest at all hazards.”

They entered an open doorway presently and found they must climb the stairs, narrow, steep, stairways, with wonderful possibilities in the way of dirt in the shadows lurking about them. At the third flight the ladies began to complain. “Why you only have this to climb once, the inmates climb them many times a day.”

“They must be strong.”

“Far from it. Look! “A baby carrying a baby brother,’ and ahead of them they saw a little girl, thin and colorless, lugging a thin baby almost as big as herself, up the steep steps, slowly, painfully, but with great solicitude and faithfulness. They sat down on the stairs and stared at the visitors as they passed them, looking with wistful, wondering eyes that betrayed depths of loneliness and suffering.

But soon the cousin stopped before a dingy little door and knocked. After some moments the door was cautiously opened a little way and a dark, Jewish, man’s face looked out, and a voice asked what they wanted.

“What shall I say we want, young ladies?” Austin turned politely to his companions as he asked the question.

“Oh, anything,” chirped Daisy. “That we want to see his shop and his hands.”

“Yes, you see, my man,” said Austin deprecatingly.

“We haf no time—no room for you, and we haf no business mid you,” and the door was unceremoniously closed. But they had had their glimpse and had discerned some women sitting as closely together as the machines would permit, that the air was full of dust and lint and odors and a sickening heat and that the floor could not be seen for the lint, scraps and litter which covered it, and they had heard that these women worked there for from twelve to sixteen hours a day.

“That was but a glimpse—we want more,” and Austin stopped again before a battered door and rapped respectfully. This time it was flung wide open—a pale, scrawny looking young man or boy holding it open with one hand while he held a hot iron in the other; an ironing table stood near, with a red hot little stove loaded with irons occupied that side of the small room. Three young men, thin-chested, blue-lipped boys sat at as many machines, with heavy cloth in their sickly looking hands.

“Yes, come in—come in,” said the boy at the door. “We have no chairs to offer you unless we give you ours, but we cannot spare the time to stand. You want to know all about us. Yes, we live, eat, sleep and work in this little room, and we work from fourteen to seventeen hours every day in it. We earn from three to five dollars a week apiece and in the dull seasons two dollars or less or nothing. We are not extravagant—we can’t be. We don’t drink, and we don’t eat—much, and we don’t take the medicine a kind doctor prescribed for us—’cause we can’t get it. We never go anywhere, never take a vacation, and we all have the consumption and will probably be dead by this time next year. Is there anything else you would like to know?”

And when they called upon them, did so as one lady would upon another, only that their conversations were freer and more confidential. Whatever could be done to help them without making them feel they were objects of charity, the two young women accomplished; and they were both well-loved by the working girls of the city. Young Austin Durham, too, because deeply interested in the laborers and their problems, and his friends declare he is becoming as great a crank as the extremest of socialists. He is speaking, writing, giving money wherever these will do the most good; and it is said that he will be successful in winning the sister who is taking to her new life wonderfully well.

And I have recently heard that the long-absent nephew has returned and that he and Miss Mabel, who had taken her patron’s name of Grey, were much pleased with each other; and that Mabel, finding no other way of bestowing her fortune upon him, has concluded to marry him. And it is to be hoped that they will live happy ever afterward, as happy as people can be while so much injustice still prevails.

The girl's eyes were glowing now, and she said in a voice of suppressed excitement:

"Your name is Mabel Percy, your mother's name was Margaret, and—and you are my sister—my name is Helen. I am your little Nellie." Mabel's heart told her in an instant that it was true and the two girls were soon wrapped in each other's arms, weeping with joy, and murmuring broken words of fondness. The others scarcely realizing what had happened, looked on very much affected, for some minutes; at last the girls separated and took a long, good look at each other and each seemed satisfied. Nellie was a very pretty girl despite the pallid cheeks and the purple shadows about her temples, and Mabel, any one could be proud of her. She turned at last to her friends and said: "You must forgive me for such a display, but I have found my lost sister, whom I have not dared to hope ever to see again. I cannot express—I do not realize it yet," and again she clasped the poor girl in her arms. Daisy in her impulsiveness hastened up to greet the newly-found sister, but Kate hesitated for she could not quite bring herself to clasp hands as an equal with a woman whom she had found working in a sweatshop. But she reflected that Nellie was very nice looking and that she would be Mabel's protegee; that she would dress well and make a sensation in society perhaps, and she would best make her peace with her while she had a chance; so she yielded after a little hesitancy and came and cordially took her hand and kissed her on her brow.

Mabel insisted on carrying away her sister that moment; it was not necessary for her to go to her poor little room for anything. She had introduced Austin, who as deferentially and admiringly bowed and greeted her as though she were a princess. Helen was petted and rested until she regained all the strength and vigor that a young woman of her age ought to possess, and as she went out more and more became a great favorite. But neither she nor her sister ever forgot the sweatshop victims; though they never intruded upon them, never asked impertinent questions. They went to their meetings, or were properly introduced when an opportunity afforded.

"Pardon us," said Austin softly, and backed away from the door. But Kate went forward and reached out a silver dollar. The boy stared at it but made no move toward touching it. She let it fall on the floor, and the young man ostentatiously got a broom and swept it out into the hall. Perhaps it did some poor wretch some good as the party walked away rather shamefacedly and left, it there.

They went down into the street now and turned to the south. They finally came to a row of old frame cottages which had once made decent homes for well-to-do people. Now, they leaned against each other, were propped up with old beams, and the weather beaten old walls looked as though they might fall away any moment. Austin knocked at the outside door here and presently a little child came and laboriously opened it. "There are some women here who sew, I believe. Will you-show us their rooms, please?"

The child almost softened into a gray smile and murmured "Yes, sir," as she ran away with a motion for them to follow. Up a flight of stairs down a long hall and she called out "Mis' Wood, some visitors!" and would have run away, but Austin caught her and gave her a piece of silver. She blushed as she finished the smile began below stairs and said "Thank you, sir." The door at hand quickly opened, and an elderly woman who might have been one's aunt living in strict retirement, so neat, so respectable and quiet she appeared, stood in the doorway awaiting them.

"Will you walk in? Though we have but an humble place to receive you in," she bowed as she stepped aside to let them enter, and immediately began to obtain some seats, motioning one girl to sit on an upturned box, another to sit on the foot of a bed and another to go to the pressing table and busy herself there. The room was very old and poor with the plastering falling off in places, but (the worst spots were covered with clean, new papers and simple woodcuts, while the windows were draped with old curtains which had at some remote period been quite handsome. A shelf of books hung on the wall, and in a corner where it was now covered with half

made garments they discerned a little old cabinet organ. When they were seated, the quiet little elderly woman spoke of the weather as though to tide over the little embarrassing pause which nearly always ensues when callers first come, with any proper remark that comes to hand. Even Daisy was somewhat abashed, and felt decidedly the "fool that had rushed in where angels," etc., and wondered how they were to carry out their "slumming" before these lady-like personages, who would have graced their own parlors. There were four younger women working at light calico wrappers, and the place had no suggestion of the ordinary "sweatshop;" yet those pretty garments were brought from a big manufacturing establishment down town and neatly made up for an incredible price, considering human beings had to live on it: but these delicate women preferred to work thus than to expose themselves to the stare of the world and go to the large manufacturing houses; they wore out fewer clothes, too. The faces of these women told sad stories; of sensitiveness, unregarded refinement, silently borne poverty, sorrowful pasts—each was a "woman with a past"—a past that was still with them. While a difficult conversation was struggling along between the elderly lady and Austin and Kate, Mabel had fixed her gaze upon a sweet, melancholy face of a girl near the window with waving, coal black hair and deep, sad, violet eyes, and the low, white beautiful brow of a Madonna. She could not help herself—she must go to this girl and then she placed her hand upon hers and spoke low and softly to her. Daisy, watching her, wondered to herself: "There, she will go to one of these women as though she were one of them and gain their good will immediately. Is it because, or in spite of the fact that she is richer than any of us?"

Meanwhile Mabel was saying: "Your face attracts me. I have been thinking that I have known and loved you sometime in the past, perhaps in some other life, but—somewhere. Let me be your friend—let me know and love you again."

The girl looked surprised and at first indignant.

"Is this a new way?" she asked. "You do not come out bluntly like the others and ask us how much we earn and what we do with it, and why we don't go out to service, and pry into our private affairs generally. But that is what you came for, I presume. Though why any of you do it, I cannot understand; you do no one any good. It must be just to gratify a small, unworthy curiosity."

"Believe me, I am in earnest. I want you to be my friend. I have no friend such as you would be to me. You—remind—you remind me of a dear little sister I lost when I was twelve years old. I have been poor and I have worked hard, scrubbed floors, sewed, picked berries, anything I could get to do to earn my bread. Don't think I do not know how it all is—I understand all about it. I am rich now but a true friend is harder to find than work was in the old days." The young woman was looking at her interestedly now, with a certain strange expectancy in her eyes, and Mabel was encouraged.

"I will tell you my story. My mother died when I was twelve, my father several years before. My dear mother was poor, her little income died with her. My dear sister was ten years old, and when we were left alone two different neighbors took us. Soon afterward the people who took my sister went away west to take up a farm. I have never heard of them since. My people were not kind to me, and I ran away from them. Then it was that I worked so hard. When about sixteen I was undermaid in a rich maiden lady's house. She was taken very sick and they found that I could nurse and care for her better than anyone else. I nursed her through a long, severe illness and when she recovered partially she still needed me. She lived a number of years, but in a weak and nervous condition and could not bear to have me away from her. She had a favorite nephew who displeased her by refusing to marry the lady she had chosen for him and going away to Africa. At last she died and it was found that she had left all her large fortune to me, cutting off her nephew without a cent. I want to find him and give it back to him, or part of it, for I am sure my dear old friend would like me to keep some of it."