

XI. PREJUDICE AGAINST LABOUR.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. K. and her daughter Emily were discussing the propriety of permitting Martha to be one of the party which was to be given at Mr. K.'s the succeeding Tuesday evening, to celebrate the birthday of George, who had lately returned from college. Martha was the niece of Mr. K. She was an interesting girl of about nineteen years of age, who, having had the misfortune to lose her parents, rather preferred working in a factory for her support, than to be dependent on the charity of her friends. Martha was a favourite in the family of her uncle ; and Mrs. K., notwithstanding her aristocratic prejudices, would gladly have her niece present at the party, were it not for fear of what people might say, Mr. and Mrs. K. suffered their children to appear on a level with factory operatives.

"Mother," said Emily, "I do wish there was not such a prejudice against those who labour for a living, and especially against those who work in a factory ; for then Martha might with propriety appear at George's party ; but I know it would be thought disgraceful to be seen at a party with a factory girl, even if she is one's own cousin, and without a single fault. And besides, the Miss Lindsays are invited, and if Martha should be present, they will be highly offended, and make her the subject of ridicule. I would not for my life have Martha's feelings wounded, as I know they would be, if either of the Miss Lindsays should ask her when she left Lowell, or how long she had worked in a factory."

"Well, Emily," said Mrs. K., " I do not know how we shall manage to keep up appearances, and also spare Martha's feelings, unless we can persuade your father to take her with him to Acton, on the morrow, and leave her at your uncle Theodore's. I do not see any impropriety in this step, as she purposes to visit Acton before she returns to Lowell."

" You will persuade me to no such thing," said Mr. K., stepping to the door of his study, which opened from the parlour, and which stood ajar, so that the conversation between his wife and daughter had been overheard by Mr. K., and also by the Hon. Mr. S., a gentleman of large benevolence, whose firmness of character placed him far above popular prejudice. These gentlemen had been in the study, unknown to Mrs. K. and Emily.

"You will persuade me to no such thing," Mr. K. repeated, as he entered the parlour accompanied by Mr. S. ; "I am determined that my niece shall be at the party. However loudly the public opinion may cry out against such a measure, I shall henceforth exert my influence to eradicate the wrong opinions entertained by what is called good society, respecting the degradation of labour ; and I will commence by placing my children and niece on a level. The occupations of people have made too much distinction in society. The labouring classes, who are in fact the wealth of a nation, -are trampled upon ; while those whom dame Fortune has placed above, or if you please, below labour, with some few honourable exceptions, arrogate to themselves all of the claims to good society. But in my humble opinion, the rich and the poor ought to be equally respected, if virtuous ; and equally detested, if vicious."

" But what will our acquaintances say ?" said Mrs. K. " It is immaterial to me what ' they say,' or think," said Mr. K., " so long as I know that I am actuated by right motives."

" But you know, my dear husband," replied his wife, " that the world is censorious, and that much of the good, or ill fortune of our children will depend on the company which they shall keep. For myself, I care but little for the opinion of the world, so long as I have the approbation of my husband, but I cannot bear to have my children treated with coldness; and besides, as George is intended for the law, his success will in a great measure depend on public opinion ; and I do not think that even Esq. S. would think it altogether judicious, under existing circumstances, for us to place our children on a level with the labouring people."

" If I may be permitted to express my opinion," said Mr. S., "I must say, in all sincerity, that I concur in sentiment with my friend K. ; and, like him, I would that the line of separation between good and bad society was drawn between the virtuous and the vicious ; and to bring about this much-to-be-desired state of things, the affluent, those who are allowed by all to have an undisputed right to rank with good society, must begin the reformation, by exerting their influence to raise up those who are bowed down. Your fears, Mrs. K., respecting your son's success, are or should be, groundless; for, to associate with the labouring people, and strive to raise them to their proper place in the scale of being, should do

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more for his prosperity in the profession which he has chosen, than he ought to realize by a contrary course of cowardice; and, I doubt not, your fears will prove groundless. So, my dear lady, rise above them ; and also above the opinions of a gainsaying multitude opinions which are erroneous, and which every philanthropist, and every Christian, should labour to correct."

The remarks of Esq. S. had so good an effect on Mrs. K., that she relinquished the idea of sending Martha to Acton.

CHAPTER II.

THE following evening Emily and Martha spent at Esquire S.'s, agreeably to an earnest invitation from Mrs. S. and her daughter Susan, who were anxious to cultivate an acquaintance with the orphan. These ladies were desirous to ascertain the real situation of a factory girl, and if it was as truly deplorable as public fame had represented, they intended to devise some plan to place Martha in a more desirable situation. Mrs. S. had a sister, who had long been in a declining state of health ; and she had but recently written to Mrs. S. to allow Susan to spend a few months with her, while opportunity should offer to engage a young lady to live with her as a companion. This lady's husband was a clerk in one of the departments at Washington ; and, not thinking it prudent to remove his family to the capital, they remained in P. ; but the time passed so heavily in her husband's absence, as to have a visible effect on her health. Her physician advised her not to live so retired as she did, but to go into lively company to cheer up her spirits ; but she thought it would be more judicious to have an agreeable female companion to live with her ; and Mrs. S. concluded, from the character given her by her uncle, that Martha would be just such a companion as her sister wanted ; and she intended in the course of the evening to invite Martha to accompany Susan on a visit to her aunt. The evening passed rapidly away, for the lively and interesting conversation, in the neat and splendid parlour of Esquire S., did not suffer any one present to note the flight of time. Martha's manners well accorded with the flattering description which her uncle had given of her. She had a good flow of language, and found no difficulty in expressing her sentiments on any subject which was introduced. Her description of " Life in Lowell " convinced those who listened to the clear, musical tones of her voice, that the many reports which they had heard, respecting the ignorance and vice of the factory operatives, were the breathings of ignorance, wafted on the wings of slander, and not worthy of credence.

"But with all your privileges, Martha," said Mrs. S., " was it not wearisome to labour so many hours in a day ? " " Truly it was at times," said Martha, " and fewer hours of labour would be desirable, if they could command a proper amount of wages ; for in that case there would be more time for improvement."

Mrs. S. then gave Martha an invitation to accompany her daughter to P., hoping that she would accept the invitation, and find the company of her sister so agreeable that she would consent to remain with her, at least for one year ; assuring her that if she did, her privileges for improvement should be equal, if not superior to those she had enjoyed in Lowell; and also that she should not be a loser in pecuniary matters. Martha politely thanked Mrs. S. for the interest she took in her behalf, but wished a little time to consider the propriety of accepting the proposal. But when Mrs. S. explained how necessary it was that her sister should have a female companion with her, during her husband's absence, Martha consented to accompany Susan, provided that her uncle and aunt K. gave their consent.

"What an interesting girl!" said Esquire S. to his lady, after the young people had retired. " Amiable and refined as Emily K. appears, Martha's manners show that her privileges have been greater, or that her abilities are superior to those of Emily. How cold and calculating, and also unjust, was her aunt K.. to think that it would detract aught from the respectability of her children for Martha to appear in company with them ! I really hope that Mr. K. will allow her to visit your sister. I will speak to him on the subject."

" She must go with Susan," said Mrs. S. ; "I am determined to take no denial. Her uprightly manners and delightful conversation will cheer my sister's spirits, and be of more avail in restoring her health than ten physicians."

Mr. K. gave the desired consent, and it was agreed by all parties concerned that some time in the following week the ladies should visit P. ; and all necessary preparations were immediately made for the journey.

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CHAPTER III.

IT was Tuesday evening, and a whole bevy of young people had assembled at Mr. K.'s. Beauty and wit were there, and seemed to vie with each other for superiority. The beaux and belles were in high glee. All was life and animation. The door opened, and Mr. K. entered the room. A young lady, rather above the middle height, and of a form of the most perfect symmetry, was leaning on his arm. She was dressed in a plain white muslin gown ; a lace kerchief was thrown gracefully over her shoulders, and a profusion of auburn hair hung in ringlets down her neck, which had no decoration save a single string of pearl ; her head was destitute of ornament, with the exception of one solitary rose-bud on the left temple ; her complexion was a mixture of the rose and the lily ; a pair of large hazel eyes, half concealed by their long silken lashes, beamed with intelligence and expression, as they cast a furtive glance at the company. " Ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. K., " this is my niece, Miss Cooly ;" and as with a modest dignity she curtsied, a beholder could scarce refrain from applying to her Milton's description of Eve when she first came from the hand of her Creator. Mr. K. crossed the room with his niece, seated her by the side of his daughter, and, wishing the young people a pleasant evening, retired. The eyes of all were turned toward the stranger, eager to ascertain whether indeed She was the little girl who once attended the same school with them, but who had for a number of years past been employed in a " Lowell factory." " Oh, it is the same," said the Miss Lindsays. " How presumptuous," said Caroline Lindsay to a gentleman who sat near her, " thus to intrude a factory girl into our company ! Unless I am very much mistaken, I shall make her sorry for her impudence, and wish herself somewhere else before the party breaks up." " Indeed, Miss Caroline, you will not try to distress the poor girl ; you cannot be so cruel," said the gentleman, who was no other than the eldest son of Esquire S., who had on the preceding day returned home, after an absence of two years on a tour through Europe. " Cruel ! " said Caroline, interrupting him, " surely, Mr. S., you cannot think it cruel to keep people where they belong ; or if they get out of the way, to set them right ; and you will soon see that I shall direct Miss Presumption to her proper place, which is in the kitchen," and giving her head a toss, she left Mr. S., and seating herself by Emily and Martha, inquired when the latter left Lowell, and if the factory girls were as ignorant as ever.

Martha replied by informing her when she left the " city of spindles ;" and also by telling her that she believed the factory girls, considering the little time they had for the cultivation of their minds, were not, in the useful branches of education, behind any class of females in the Union. " What chance can they have for improvement ? " said Caroline : " they are driven like slaves to and from their work, for fourteen hours in each day, and dare not disobey the calls of the factory bell. If they had the means for improvement, they have not the time ; and it must be that they are quite as ignorant as the southern slaves, and as little fitted for society." Martha coloured to the eyes at this unjust aspersion ; and Emily, in pity to her cousin, undertook to refute the slur, Mr. S. drew near, and seating himself by the cousins, entered into a conversation respecting the state of society in Lowell. Martha soon recovered her self-possession, and joined in the conversation with more than her usual animation, yet with a modest dignity which attracted the attention of all present. She mentioned the evening schools for teaching penmanship, grammar, geography, and other branches of education, and now highly they were prized, and how well they were attended by the factory girls. She also spoke of the Lyceum and Institute, and other lectures ; and her remarks were so appropriate and sensible, that even those who were at first for assisting Caroline Lindsay in directing her to her " proper place," and who even laughed at what they thought to be Miss Lindsay's wit, became attentive listeners, and found that even one who "had to work for a living " could by her conversation add much to the enjoyment of good society."

All were now disposed to treat Martha with courtesy, with the exception of the Miss Lindsays, who sat biting their lips for vexation ; mortified to think that in trying to make Martha an object of ridicule, they had exposed themselves to contempt. Mr. S. took upon himself the task (if task it could be called, for one whose feelings were warmly enlisted in the work) of explaining in a clear and concise manner the impropriety of treating people with contempt for none other cause than that they earned an honest living by labouring with their hands. He spoke of the duty of the rich, with regard to meliorating the condition of the poor, not only in affairs of a pecuniary nature, but also by encouraging them in the way of well doing, by bestowing upon them that which would cost a good man or woman nothing, namely, kind looks, kind words, and all the sweet courtesies of life. His words were not lost ; for those who heard him have overcome their prejudices against labour and labouring people, and respect the virtuous, whatever may be their occupation.

CHAPTER IV.

BRIGHT and unclouded was the morning which witnessed the departure of the family coach from the door of the Hon. Mr S. Henry accompanied his sister and the beautiful Martha, whose champion he had been at the birth-night party of George K. Arrived at P., they found that they were not only welcome, but expected visitors ; for Esquire S. had previously written to his sister-in-law, apprising her of Henry's return, and his intention of visiting her in company with his sister Susan, and a young lady whom he could recommend as being just the companion of which she was in need. In a postscript to his letter he added, " I do not hesitate to commend this lovely orphan to your kindness, for I know you will appreciate her worth."

When Henry S. took leave of his aunt and her family, and was about to start upon his homeward journey, he found that a two days' ride, and a week spent in the society of Martha, had been at work with his heart. He requested a private interview, and what was said, or what was concluded on, I shall leave the reader to imagine, as best suits his fancy. I shall also leave him to imagine what the many billets-doux contained which Henry sent to P., and what were the answers he received, and read with so much pleasure. As it is no part of my business to enter into any explanation of that subject, I will leave it, and rail the reader's attention to the sequel of my story, hoping to be pardoned if I make it as short as possible.

It was a lovely moonlight evening. The Hon. Mr. S. and lady, Mr. and Mrs. K., and Caroline Lindsay, were seated in the parlour of Mr. K. Caroline had called to inquire for Martha, supposing her to be in Lowell. Caroline's father had been deeply engaged in the eastern land speculation, the result of which was a total loss of property. This made it absolutely necessary that his family should labour for their bread ; and Caroline had come to the noble resolution of going to Lowell to work in a factory, not only to support herself, but to assist her parents in providing for the support of her little brother and sisters. It was a hard struggle for Caroline to bring her mind to this ; but she had done it, and was now ready to leave home. Dreading to go where all were strangers, she requested Mr. K. to give her directions where to find Martha, and to honour her as the bearer of a letter to his niece. " I know," said she, " that Martha's goodness of heart will induce her to secure me a place of work, notwithstanding my former rudeness to her a rudeness which has caused me to suffer severely, and of which I heartily repent." Mr. K. informed Caroline that he expected to see his niece that evening ; and he doubted not she would recommend Miss Lindsay to the overseer with whom she had worked while in Lowell ; and also introduce her to good society, which she would find could be enjoyed, even in the " city of spindles," popular prejudice to the contrary notwithstanding. Esquire and Mrs. S. approved of Caroline's resolution of going to Lowell, and spoke many words of encouragement, and also prevailed on her to accept of something to assist in defraying the expenses of her journey, and to provide for any exigency which might happen. They were yet engaged in conversation, when a coach stopped at the door, and presently George and Emily entered the parlour ! They were followed by a gentleman and lady in bridal habiliments. George stepped back, and introduced Mr. Henry S. and lady. " Yes, "said Henry laughingly, " I have brought safely back the Factory Pearl, which a twelvemonth since I found in this very room, and which I have taken for my own. The lady threw back her veil, and Miss Lindsay beheld the countenance of Martha Cooly.

I shall omit the apologies and congratulations of Caroline, and the assurances of forgiveness and proffers of friendship of Martha. The reader must also excuse me from delineating the joy with which Martha was received by her uncle and aunt K. ; and the heartfelt satisfaction which Esquire and Mrs. S. expressed in their son's choice of a wife. It is enough to state that all parties concerned were satisfied and happy, and continue so to the present time. To sum up the whole, they are happy themselves, and diffuse happiness all around them.

Caroline Lindsay was the bearer of several letters from Martha, now Mrs. S., to her friends in Lowell. She spent two years in a factory, and enjoyed the friendship of all who knew her ; and when she left Lowell her friends could not avoid grieving for the loss of her company, although they knew that a bright day was soon to dawn upon her. She is now the wife of George K., and is beloved and respected by all who know her. Well may she say, " Sweet are the uses of adversity," for adversity awoke to energy virtues which were dormant, until a reverse of fortune. Her father's affairs arc in a measure retrieved ; and he says that he is doubly compensated for his loss of property in the happiness he now enjoys. I will take leave of the reader, hoping that if he has hitherto had any undue prejudice against labour, or labouring people, he will overcome it, and excuse my freedom and plainness of speech.

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Source: [Mind Among the Spindles: Selections from the Lowell Offering](#)