

PRISONERS OF POVERTY.

WOMEN WAGE-WORKERS, THEIR TRADES AND THEIR LIVES.

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XIV.

THE WIDOW MALONEY'S BOARDERS.

To the old New-Yorker taking his penance way through streets whose only imagination can supply the old landmarks, long ago vanished, there is a conviction that he knows the city foot by foot as it has crept northward, and he repudiates the thought that its growth has ended such possibility, and that many a dark corner is as remote from his or any knowledge save that of its occupants, as if in Caffre-land. The newest New-Yorker has small interest in anything but the west side and the space down town occupied by his store or office.

And so it chances that in spite of occasional series of descriptive articles; in spite of an elaborately written local history, and a number of novels whose background is the city life and thought, there is little real knowledge, and save among charitable workers, the police, and adventurous newspaper men, no thought of what life may be lived not a stone's throw from the great artery of New-York, Broadway.

On one point there can be no doubt. Not Africa in its most pestilential and savage form holds sorer disease or more determined barbarians than nest together under many a roof within hearing of the rush and roar of the busy streets where men come and go, eager for no knowledge or wisdom under the sun save the knowledge that will make them better bargainners. There comes even a certain impatient distrust of those who persist in unavailing researches and more unsavory details of the results. If there is not distrust; if the easy-going kindness that is a portion of the American temperament is stirred, it is but for the moment, and when the hand that sought the pocket or the check-book instinctively has presented its gift, interest is over. A fresh sensation wipes out all trace of the transient feeling, and though it may again be roused by judicious effort, how rarely is it that more than the automatic movement toward the pocket results! What might come if for even one hour the impatient giver walked through the dark passages, stood in the foul, dimly lighted rooms and saw what manner of creature New-York nourishes in her slums, giving to every child in freest measure that training in all foulness that eye or ear or mind can take in that will fit it in time for the habitation in prison or reformatory on which money is never spared,—who shall say! They are filled by free choice, these nests of all evil. The men and women who herd in them know nothing better; indeed, may have known something even worse. They are Polish Jews, Bohemians, the lowest order of Italians, content with unending work, the smallest wage, and an order of food that the American, no matter how low he may be brought, can never stomach. Yet they assimilate in one point, being as bent upon getting on as the most determined American, and accepting to this end conditions that seem more those of an Inferno than any thing the upper world has known. It is among these people, chiefly Polish Jews and Bohemians with the inevitable commixture of Irish, that one finds the worst forms of child labor; children that in happy homes are still counted babies here in these dens beginning at four or five to sew on buttons or pick out threads.

It is not of child-labor and the outrages involved in it that I speak to-day, save indirectly, as it forms part of the mass of evil making up the present industrial system and to be encountered at every turn by the most superficial investigator. It is rather of certain specific conditions, found at many points in tenement-house life, but never in such accumulated degree of villainess at any point save one outside the Fourth Ward. And if the reader, like various recent correspondents, is disposed to believe that I am merely "making up a case," using a little experience and a great deal of imagination, I refer him or her to the forty-third annual report of the New-York Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor. There, in detail to a degree impossible here, will be found the official report of the inspector appointed to examine the conditions of life in the building known as "The Big Flat," in Mulberry-st. There are smaller houses that are worse in construction and condition, but there is none controlled by one management where so many are gathered under one roof. The first floor has rooms for fourteen families; the remaining five for sixteen each, and the census of 1880 gave the number of inhabitants as 478, a sufficient number to make up the population of the average village. The formal inspection and the report upon it were made in September 1886, and the report is now accessible to all who desire information on these phases of city life. It is Mrs. Maloney herself whose methods best give us the heart of the matter, and who, having several callings, is the owner of an experience which appears to hold as much surprise for herself as for the hearer.

"Blurs I found things that interestin' that I'm in no haste to be through wid 'em, an' on for me taste o' Purgatory, rot haint' that; there mightn't be more'n a taste," Mrs. Maloney said, on a day in which she unfolded to me her views of life in general, her small gray eyes twinkling, her arms akimbo on her mighty hips, and her cap-border flapping about a face weather-beaten and high-colored to a degree not warranted even by her present profession, as apple-woman. Whether whiskey or stale beer is most responsible is unknown. It is only certain that, having submitted with the utmost cheerfulness to the perennial beatings of a husband only half her size, she found consolation in a glass now and then with a sympathizing neighbor and at last in a daily resort to the same friend. There had been a gradual descent from prosperity. Dennis, if small, was wiry and phenomenally strong, and earned steady wages as porter during their first years in the country. But the children, as they grew, went to the bad entirely, living on the earnings of the mother, who washed and scrubbed and slaved, with a heart always full of excuses for the hulking brutes who came naturally at last to the ends that might have been foretold. Their education had been in the Fourth Ward; they were champion bullies and ruffians of whom the ward still boasts. Mrs. Maloney herself acquiring a certain distinction, as the mother of the hardest cases yet sent up from Cherry-st. But if she had no power to save her own life became easier for whomsoever she elected to guard. Wretched children crept under her wing to escape the beating awaiting them when they had failed to bring home the amount demanded of them. Women, beaten and turned out into the night, fled to her for comfort, and the girl who had lost her place or to whom worse misfortune had come told her story to the big-hearted sinner who nodded and cried and said: "It's the Widly Maloney that'll see you're not put upon more. Hold on an' be sisy 'lone, an' all'll come out the way you'd be havin' it, an' why not?"

It was at this stage of experience that Mrs. Maloney decided to remove to the "Big Flat." The last raid of Dennis, the youngest and only boy not housed at the expense of the State, had reduced her belongings to their lowest terms, and she took possession of her new quarters, accompanied only by a rickety table, three chairs, a bed with two old straw mattresses, and some quilts too ragged to give any token of their original characteristics; a stove which owned but one leg, the rest being supplied by bricks, and such dishes and other small furniture as could be carried in a basket. But there went with her a girl kicked out by the last man who had temporarily called her mistress; a mere child still, who at once had begun work in a bag-factory, passing through various grades of slightly higher employment, till seduced by the floor-walker of the store that it had been her highest ambition to reach. Almost as much her fault as his undoubted, her silly head holding but one desire, that for fine clothes and never to work any more, but a woman's heart waking in her, when the baby came, and promising her to harder work and better life when she had ever known. There was no chance of either with the baby, and when at last she turned out the accommodations to an old couple in a back building who made this their business, and took a place again in the store, it was felt as well as known that there came with the wretched little life a new hope. But the danger had been a swift one, and she was again in the hands of the same floor-walker.

which she had been thrust, thinking of the river as the last refuge left, the widow had pushed her before her up the stairs and said:

"Poor soul, if there's none to look out for ye, then who but me should do it?"

This was the communion who lay by her side under the ragged quilts, life still refusing to give place to death, though every paroxysm of coughing shortened the conflict.

"She's that patient that the saints themselves—all glory to their blessed names,—couldn't be more so; but I'd not know how to manage if it wasn't for the foot-warmer I call her; that's Angela there, wid eyes that go through you an' the life beaten out of her by the man that called himself her father, an' wasn't at all, at all. It's she that does the kaping of the house, an' sleeps across the foot, an' it's mine they think the two av 'em, else they'd never a let me in, the rules bein', 'no lodgers.' It's not lodgers they are. It's me boarders, full fledged, an' whose a better right than me, though I'd not be sayin' so to the housekeeper that'd need forty pair o' eyes to her two to see what's gold on under her nose."

The "foot-warmer's" office had ceased for one of them before the month ended, and when the Potter's Field had received the pine coffin followed only by the two watchers, the widow made haste to bring in another candidate for the same position; one upon whom she had kept her eye for a month, certain that worse trouble was on the way than loss of work.

"There was the look on her that manes but the one thing," she said afterward. "There's thim that stpau'd everything an' niver a word, an' there's thim that turns desperat. She was a desperat wan."

Never had a "desperate wan" better reason. A factory girl almost from babyhood, her apprenticeship having begun at seven, she had left the mill at fourteen; a tall girl older than her years in look and experience. New-York was her Mecca, and to New-York she came, with a week's wages in her pocket on which to live till work should be found, and neither relative nor friend save a girl who had preceded her by a few months and was now at work in a fringe and gimp factory earning \$7 a week and promising the same to the child after a few week's training. But seven years in a cotton-mill, if they had given quickness in one direction, had blunted all power in others. The fingers were unskillful and clumsy and her mind too wandering and inattentive to master details, and the place was quickly lost. She entered her name as candidate for the first vacancy in a Grand-st. store, and, in the meantime, went into a coffee and spice mill and became coffee-picker at \$3 a week. This lasted a month or two, but even here there was dissatisfaction with lack of thoroughness, and she was presently discharged. The vacancy had come, and she went at once into the store, her delicate face and pretty eyes commending her to the manager, who lost no time in telling her what impression she could produce if she were better dressed. Weak, irresponsible, hopelessly careless and past any power to undo these conditions, there was some instinct in the untought life that put her instantly on the defensive.

"I'm not good for much," she said, "but I'm too good for that. There's nothing you could promise would get you your will and there won't be."

Naturally as the siege declared itself a hopeless one, the manager found it necessary to till her place by some more competent hand. There was an interval of waiting in which she pawned almost the last article of clothing remaining that could be dispensed with, and then went into a bakery, where the hours were from 7 a. m. to 10 p. m., sometimes later. She was awkward at making change, but her gentle manners attracted customers, and the baker himself soon cast a favorable eye upon her, and speedily made the same proposition that had driven her from her last employment. The baker's wife knew the symptoms and on the same day discharged the girl.

"I don't say it's your fault," she said, "but he's started about you, and it's for your own good I tell you to go. The best thing for you is to go back to your mother, or else take a place with some nice woman that'll keep an eye to you. You'll always be run after. I know your kind, that no man looks at without wanting to fool with 'em. You take my advice and go into a place."

The chance came that night. The mistress of a cheap boarding house in East Broadway, her patrons chiefly young clerks from Grand and Division st. stores, offered her home, and \$8 a month, and Lizzie, who by this time was frightened and discouraged, accepted on the instant. She was well accustomed to long hours, and she had never minded standing as many of the girls did, her apprenticeship in the mill having made it comparatively easy.

But the drudgery undergone here was beyond anything her life had ever known. Her day began at 5 and it never ended before 11. She slept on an old mattress on the kitchen floor, and as her strength failed from the incessant labor, lost all power of protest and accepted each new demand as something against which there could be no revolt. There was abundance of coarse food and thus much advantage, but she had no knowledge that taught her how to make work easier, nor had her mistress any thought of training her. She was a dish-washing machine, obedient, and broke and chipped even the rough ware that formed the table furniture, till the exasperated mistress threatened to turn her off if another piece were destroyed. It was a case of hopeless inattitude and when in early spring she sickened, and the physician called in grudgingly declared it a case of typhus brought on by the conditions in which she had lived, she was sent at once to the hospital and left to such fate as might come.

A clean bed, rest and attendance seemed a heaven to the girl when consciousness came back, and she shrank from any thought of going out again to make light for existence.

"I don't know what the matter is," she said to the doctor as she mended, "but somehow I ain't fit to make a living. I shall have to go back to the mill, but I said I never would do that."

"You shall go to some training school and be taught," said the doctor, who had stood looking at her speculatively yet pitifully.

"Ah, but I couldn't learn. Somehow things don't stick to me. I'm not fit to earn a living."

"You're of the same stuff as a good many thousand of your kind," the doctor said under his breath, and turned away with a sigh.

Lizzie went out convalescent but still weak and uncertain, and took refuge with one of the bakery girls who had had a dark bedroom in a tenement house near the "Big Flat." She looked for work. She answered advertisements, and at last began upon the simplest form of necktie, and in her slow, bungling fashion began to earn again. But she had no strength. She sat at the window and looked over to the Big Flat and watched the swarm that came and went. Five hundred people in it, they told her, and half of them drunk at once. It was certain that there were always men lying drunk in the hallways in the midst of ashes and filth that accumulated there almost unbecked. The saloon below was always full; the stale beer dives all along the street full also, above all at night when the haunting street-walkers came out, and fiddles squeaked, and cheap pianos rattled, and songs and shouts were overlapped at moments by the shrieks of beaten women or the oaths and cries of a sudden fight. Slowly it was coming to the girl that this was all the life New-York had for her, that if she failed to meet the demand employer after employer had made upon her, she would die in this hole, where neither joy nor hope had any place. Her clothes were in rags. She went hungry and cold, and had grown too stupefied with trouble to plan anything better. At last it was plain to her that death must be best. She said to herself that the river could never tell, and that there would be rest and no more cold or hunger, and it was to the river that she went at night, as the Widow Maloney rose before her and said:

"You'll come home wid me, me dear, an' no wurruds about it."

Lizzie looked at her stupidly. "You'd better not stop me," she said. "I'm no good. I can't earn my living anywhere any more. I don't know how I'd better be out of the way."

"Shure you'll be enough out o' the way when you're in the top o' the Big Flat," said Mrs. Maloney. "An' once there we'll see."

Lizzie followed her without a word, but when the stairs were climbed and she sunk panting and gasping on one of the three chairs, it was quite plain to the widow that more work had begun. That it will very soon end is also quite plain to whoever dares the terrors of the Big Flat, and climbs to the wretched rooms, which in spite of dirt and foulness within and without is a truer sanatorium than many a better place. The army of incompetents will very shortly be the less by one, but more recruits are in training and New-York guarantees an unending supply.

"Shure if there's naught they know how to do," says the widow, "why should one be lookin' to have thim do what they can't. It's one thing we come to, what with seein' the goings on all me life, but chiefly in the Big Flat, that if it were not made to learn, whether they like it or not, some thim that'll keep hands on head from mischief, there's small use in laws an' laws in muddin' about 'em when they're done with livin' at all, as it is, but there's a thing they brou'd me o' the likes, me an' I'm only wantin' a little bit to be a plain one, an' I'm no more o' the kind, but I'll stand for me an' my Maloney, if the same, stand for you an' no other."