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The Day's Work

By NOEL GRANT

THE mountains rose steeply on either side of the valley just leaving enough room at their bases for a mountain stream, a rickety railroad and a rough, boulder-strewn waggon road. The stream was insignificant of itself, but behind it lay the mountains and in case of a heavy rain, the stream would swell in a few hours to a raging torrent. The little mining town of Marmot lay in this valley, or rather, straggled over the sides of the mountain along the valley. Level ground there was none, and each shanty stood, as it were, on stilts, the verandah, along the front of the house, overhanging the railroad below, over which the trains creaked and groaned, shrieked and jostled till the coal rolled from the over-filled cars.

It could not be called a beautiful place by any means, but, indeed, none of the people thought of beauty. It was a town filled with smoke, coal dust, dirty-faced miners, ragged children and evil odours. The thoroughfare was the track, and along it trudged stooped-shouldered miners, unkempt slovenly women and toddling youngsters. The odours of the place were awful, as each family heaved its garbage over the verandah, toward the stream below, but never into it. Above the houses, above the people's heads was the wild beauty God had given the place, but no one ever raised his eyes to look upon it. They plodded along the track with no object in life but to place their feet on the ties without tripping and thus reach the company store or the mine-mouth quicker.

The faces of the people showed their lack of the love of Nature, their joyless lives. A smile was never seen. Everyone had the same listless, worn-out expression. The men smoked, slept or drank away their spare time and their money. The women were drudges with nothing to relieve the monotony save an occasional gossip at the top of their voices across the valley to their neighbours' verandahs.

True, the work was hard, lonely, disagreeable, dangerous. But is that not all the more reason that once outside of the mine, they should lift their eyes to the sunshine, should enjoy the beauties around, should give thanks for being alive to see these things? But no, each man trudged to the mine in the dusk of morning, swinging his dinner pail and trudged back again at night, dirty, tired and bent. He stripped to his waist on his verandah and washed the coal dust off him, ate his supper and wandered down to the saloon. This happening day after day, week in and week out, of course must take away from a man's higher nature and his natural instincts for the beautiful.

The last house in the village, and separated from the rest, belonged to Sam Brunt. He was isolated from the others, not so much from his own desire, but because the company wished to avoid as many fights as possible. Several times he had been in prison for some stabbing affray, and so it was just as well to keep him away from the rest.

He was a heavily-built man, stooped-shouldered, long-armed, and with his head thrust forward. His face was cruel and evil. The eye-brows were heavy and met over his nose. His eyes were iron-grey, piercing and inclined to grow very cold with anger. His mouth was overhung by a heavy red moustache through which a glimpse of a bitter smile could be seen, and his long upper teeth projecting. He was not a handsome man, and not inclined to win one's confidences. Still he had managed to secure a wife. Poor woman, she led the life of a dog. She worked for him, slaved for him, and for it she received cruel words and blows if he happened to be drunk. He encouraged the children to disobey her and to talk to her as he did. He had no respect for her and openly said she was no use to him, and he wished he could get rid of her.

Of house furnishings there were none. The walls were bare. The furniture consisted of a couple of rickety beds, a rough table and several boxes for chairs. There were hardly enough cooking utensils to cook his coarse

meals of fat pork and cabbage. Here in this hovel she had to work for this beast, receive his jibes and jeers with as good a grace as she could. She reared his children to what they were and clothed them as well as her poor fingers knew how, while she, herself, was content with a Mother Hubbard wrapper and sunbonnet.

For years she had lived in such conditions, gradually growing thinner and thinner, more and more bent, more and more haggard. Her hands were long and bony, with the fingers twisted and bent. Her thin calico wrapper flapped about her poor shriveled form. She had no companions; she had no joys; she had nothing save her work, the spark of life God had given her, and a beast for a husband. Human endurance could not stand this forever.

All day it had rained in torrents. The creek rose and rose foaming about the rocks, carrying boxes, barrels and refuse away, and thus giving the village its much needed cleansing. The road was mud to the knees. The water ran down the mountain side and a little stream ran under the house, carrying mud and rattling pebbles down to the creek below.

She had risen in the morning to get Sam's breakfast, but felt so weak she could hardly stand. However, she had kept up till he left, and then crept back to bed. One of the children told her nearest neighbour she was sick, and this good woman had come in and done what she could for her and sent for the doctor. Hour after hour dragged away, and still it rained, and still no doctor. It neared Sam's hour for supper, and still she lay in bed, tortured and doubled up with pain.

At last she heard a step on the verandah. It was Brunt, drunk as usual. "What, you in bed, Miry! Where's my supper? Where's my supper, I say? What you mean by stayin' in bed and not doin' any work? I'll fix you, old woman. Get up and get my supper now and hurry up about it, too." The poor woman made a move to get up, but sank back with a groan. "None of your nonsense, woman. I know you. It's just laziness. You're just like all the rest of the women. You're lazy and content to live on me just so long as I get enough money for you to have a good time and a good house. Get up and get to work now, and no foolin'. I been workin' all day, and here you been lying in bed takin' it easy. You got to get up now and take your turn at workin'." Miry tried to tell him she could not do it, that she was too sick, but just at that moment the doctor walked in.

He had not stopped to knock, but pushed open the door, and there he stood in the middle of the room, the rain dripping from his face, and streams of water running from his clothes and shoes as he had had to wade the creek, and it was up to his arm pits. "Hello, Mrs. Brunt, you sick? I've been trying to get here all day, but I couldn't get here any quicker. But here I am now, and I'll just take off my coat and hang it up to dry, and we'll have you all fixed up in no time. I tell you it's been an awful day this, and I've just been run clean off my legs with so many people sick. But don't you go worryin' yourself now. We'll have you all fixed up."

Sam had stood back during this, but now he stepped up and demanded who had sent for the doctor. He wasn't going to have him around his wife. She wasn't sick, and didn't need any "damn pill-pedlar" around her. He didn't have any use for doctors, anyway, and wasn't going to stand for one now. Anyway, his wife wasn't any good to him, just a lazy good-for-nothing, and if she was sick, let her be sick, and if she died, so much the better. The doctor told him he was drunk, and better clear out, or he'd be causing trouble, and that it was his duty to be there and attend her, and he wouldn't stand for any interference.

That angered Sam beyond endurance. He started to walk the floor, cursing the doctor and threatening all kinds of abuse. "I ain't a-goin' to stand for any of your nonsense, and I won't have you around my wife. You just better pack