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THE HAPPINESS OF BEING RICH.

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"Oh, Katie dear, what heavenly weather it is to-day. Oh, the beautiful May month. It feels to me like butter and milk—so balmy and so sweet."

"Yes, Annemie, I don't know what ails my feet; they are itching to set off dancing by themselves. This first blessed sunny day makes me tremble all over with gladness; it seems to shine quite through me, bones and marrow and all."

"Only look how they are all pouring out of their houses to get a little of it. Now life begins to be snug and happy again; we can sit out in the street, and sing and chat and drink in the fresh air while we work."

"Yes, 'tis a blessing, isn't it, Trieny? after being shut up these four dreary, endless months in the house, like a poor bird in a cage."

"And scarcely able to draw our breath in the close, smoky air of our rooms."

"And wear out our eyes in the gray murky winter days."

"Yes, and catch colds, and cough so that you feared that March would blow you away with him to another world."

"And forget that there is a sun in the sky;—and count the days one after another, till the darling May brings light and warmth back again, for the poor man as well as for the rich lord—"

"Come, come, winter is gone by and forgotten; don't let us think of the old grumbler any more—"

'Shepherds and shepherdesses gay, Sing and dance, for see—'tis May.'

Bring your frames a little nearer; we will sit here, all four close together, else some kill-joy will come between us."

The young girls who were thus chanting, as they prattled, a feeble hymn of praise to the exhilarating May month, were sitting with many others in a long narrow street of the city of Antwerp.

The houses on either side of this little street were mean and small; they had each a little round-headed door at the entrance, and admitted the scanty daylight, yet further diminished in its transit through the green panes of their narrow windows.

One of the corner houses was distinguished from the others by its greater height and its new-fashioned window frames. This was the grocer's corner; and although his customers were all of a very humble class, he had contrived to do very well, and at the end of a few years might be considered rich, in comparison with his humble neighbors.

Over the way stood an old house, which also boasted a first floor; but, for all that, its exterior was rather mean and dirty. Above the door was a sign board, on which were painted two large letters, A. B. These signified that the house was occupied by a chimney-sweeper, or, as he was called in the Antwerp patois, a Schouwveger. This citizen ranked second in the street after the grocer, because his house was his own property.

After him, in order of worldly consideration, followed a shoemaker, or rather a cobbler, who could not indeed boast of a house of his own, but yet contrived by industry to live without want and without care.

It was before the shoemaker's door that Katie and her three friends sat working; further on in the street were many other damsels, who were also gathered into little groups, and continued their work amid reiterated exclamations and felicitations on the beauty of the weather.

Each of them had before her a square frame, on which was stretched a piece of net or woven lace; and on this they were embroidering, with needle and thread, flowers and foliage of every conceivable kind. In Antwerp phrase, they were working lace-stitch, in order that at the close of a long day they might have earned a few sous, and so lighten the burden of a mother's house-keeping; also, in good seasons, to buy a neat little frock, or a pretty cap with gay-colored ribbons, for themselves.

Although these embroiderers belonged to the lowest class of artisans, the cleanliness and even elegance of their dress were very remarkable. It is an acknowledged fact that the Antwerp girls of the lower classes are distinguished by an especial cleanliness, and also by the becoming way in which they arrange their dress; and, among them all, the lace stitch workers are very conspicuous. How can they help being always clean, when from morning to-night their hands are gliding over snow-white net or lace? If the least stain or soil were to disgrace their work, they would be scolded for their untidiness by the lace factors, be mulcted of their pay, and refused further work.

You must not imagine, however, dear reader, that this tidiness had its origin in necessity alone. It may have been so at first, perhaps, but every one knows the force of habit. This remarkable cleanliness has now become quite a characteristic

and instinct of the lace-stitch workers; and if at any time they are obliged to earn their daily bread by labor of another kind, the same neatness and propriety may be remarked in all they do.

Moreover, look at them well from head to foot; their clothes are indeed very humble, and of common cotton; sometimes the color has partly disappeared; but how nicely washed—how neatly ironed out—not a speck, not a stain; it is as if they had seven Sundays in the week.

Are they pretty? Yes, and no. They are young, and that is something. Most of them might have been pretty too, for their features are fine and regular enough; but their cheeks are altogether so pale, their limbs so thin! Poor daughters of the people, luxury and wealth have hunted them out of all the open airy streets, built houses everywhere of which they could never pay the rent, and driven them back farther and farther into the dingy, dirty streets, in which neither burgher nor rich man cared to live.—Drooping flowers, reared in dusky cellars and garrets, their blood is colorless, and consumption is the worm which lies gnawing at the root of the life of so many of them; and yet they are blithe, and they sing amid their everlasting toil.

Of the four girls who were sitting and working together before the shoemaker's door, there were two whose vital energies had not been impaired by lack of light and air and fitting nourishment. Their parents were in somewhat easier circumstances, and perhaps they had not, like their neighbors, lived generation after generation in the stifling, unwholesome cellars of this narrow street.

One of them was called Katie, and was the daughter of the shoemaker; the other was called Annemie, and lived at the green grocer's. The cheeks of both were ruddy with the fresh hue of youth, and their lips had not lost their exquisite coral-red. Katie had soft blue eyes and fair hair; Annemie looked as if she had Spanish blood in her veins, for her face was shadowed with a light brown, and her eyes and hair were black as jet.

While they were working quietly with their two companions, they saw at the end of the street a dame already advanced in years. She was coming toward them, and they followed her with their eyes until she disappeared at the little door of the chimney-sweeper's house. One of the girls then remarked:

"Dame Smet doesn't let the grass grow under her feet, she has got a new gown again, and a double-plaited cap—"

"Oh, Annemie, there you are again, always sneering and quizzing. What matter is it of ours what clothes other people wear, if they are able to pay for them?"

"Yes, Katie, that's very true; but for all that, you see, pride may have a good deal to do with it."

"Pride? Oh, she is such a good, kind creature!"

"Yes, yes; Dame Smet holds up her head as if my Lady Van Hoogenberg were her sister; and as she goes along in her grand gowns, she looks down on us as if we were not good enough to tie her shoes."

"You think so, Annemie; but I assure you it is not so. Everybody has her own ways. Dame Smet is of a very good family. She has an aunt in Holland who is so rich, so rich! I don't know how many bags of gold she has—and, you see, when anybody comes of a good family it is in the blood, and you can't get rid of it again."

"Always with her prating about her family! What good does that do her. Everybody, even her own husband, laughs at her. I should be ashamed to make so much fuss about it; it is so absurd in the wife of a schouwveger."

Katie was not pleased with these taunts; she raised her voice, and said, in a sharper tone, as if she were a little out of humor—

"I don't know what concerns it is of yours.—Schouwveger or not, they live in their own house and owe nobody anything; they can pay their way, and needn't trouble themselves about the envy of their neighbors."

"It would be odd if you didn't like her," said another of the girls, with a smile; "she is Pauw's mother."

"Come, come, Katie, don't be vexed—it is only my way of talking," said Annemie. "Everybody bakes his own loaf as he likes it; and if he chooses to burn his fingers in the pan, that is his own lookout."

"After a short pause, one of the girls in a kindly tone—

"Tell us, now, Katie: I heard say yesterday—but I can't believe it—that you are going to be married."

With a heightened color on her cheeks, Katie stammered out—

"Oh, these neighbors! Give them an inch, they take an ell!"

"So, it is true, then?"

"Not quite. Master Smet has been joking about it with my father."

Ha, then the well is half done. Well good luck to you, Katie!"

One of the other girls curbed her lip with a kind of disdain, and said—

"Ay, ay, Kate—to marry a chimney-sweeper—a fellow who is, six days in the week, as black as old Nick himself! Why, if he were covered with gold from head to foot, I wouldn't have him."

"That's because you can't get him!" muttered Katie.

"I wouldn't have him either, though he is the merriest lad in the whole quarter, remarked another girl. "Sundays, when he is washed, he is all very well; but in the week! you can't shake hands with him but you must run off to the pump; and when you talk to him, you have always that everlasting lack phiz of his before your eyes. Bless me! 'tis enough to frighten one out of one's senses. When he laughs and shows his white teeth, he cuts a face like a dog chewing cayenne pepper—"

"What a wicked tongue you have!" interposed the talkative Annemie. "Pauw is the best lad you will find anywhere about; he sings such merry songs, he dances and jumps—he is the life of the whole street. Everybody is glad when he comes by, for wherever he is there is laughter and merriment. And then look at him on Sundays, when he walks up and down with his blue coat, and tosses his head with his pretty cap on it! I say he is a very good-looking lad, and Katie is quite right to like him—especially if her father and mother don't object."

At this moment they heard at a distance the cry—Aep aep aep!—echoing merrily through the narrow street.

Ah, there is Pauw, with his father!" exclaimed they altogether, with a joyous laugh. "Ah, Jan Grap and Pauwken. Plezier!"

At one end of the street, some considerable distance from the group of girls, a man was seen approaching. He was about fifty years old, but in the full vigor of life, and walked with a light elastic step, and with his head quite upright. His clothes, like those of all the schouwvegers, were made of coarse, unbleached linen, and fitted quite close to his body; he was covered—face and hands and all—with soot. He seemed of a lively temperament; for as he went along he kept up a continual laugh with the neighbors, and had a joke for everybody.

Five or six steps behind him came his son, Pauw, a sprightly youth on the verge of manhood. His face and clothes were black with soot; the whiteness of his eyes and teeth, and the living red of his lips, contrasted strikingly with his dusky features.

A sack filled with soot hung over his shoulder; in his right hand was a little brush, and, besides, a branch of whitethorn in full flower—the May-flower of the Antwerp people.

As he entered the street, humming a lively ditty, and making all kinds of astonishing leaps, his grimaces and gesticulation awakened the merriment of all the neighborhood.

"Vieze Breugel," said one.

"They may well call him Pauwken-Plezier," remarked another; "there is always laughing going on where he is."

"As the old birds sing, so the young ones chirp. He and his father will die laughing."

"'Tis the way with the Antwerp chimney-sweepers—'tis the badge of their craft. A solemn schouwveger is more scarce than a lively undertaker."

"Well, that's what I like," said an old chair-maker; "they're quite in the right of it; they don't neglect their work, and they pay everybody his own. Do well and live merry: you can't better that."

Annemie sprang up suddenly and exclaimed—

"Listia! he's got a new song. Oh, isn't it a beautiful one? Where does he get them all from?"

"He makes them all himself," said Katie with gratified pride.

"Dear me! is he such a scholar as that? I didn't know that."

"Yes; there isn't a single notice on the church door that he can't read; he has it all at his fingers' ends."

The young chimney-weep had meanwhile come so near that they could distinguish what he was singing so lustily. It was a right merry ditty, and its light tripping melody was well adapted to the peculiar kind of dancing step which the Antwerp folk call a "flikker" and the French "un-entrechtat."

Pauwken-Plezier sang thus, with sundry odd grimaces by way of accompaniment—

"Schouwvegers gay, who live in A. B., Companions so jolly, All frolic and folly— Schouwvegers gay, who live in A. B., Come out and sing us a glee.

Your Schouwvegers gay is a right merry fellow; Though sooty his skin, The wit's all within. The blacker his phiz, The blither he is He climbs and he creeps—

He brushes and sweeps— He stings and he loops— At each chimney he drags till he's mellow. Aep, aep, aep! Light-hearted and free— Always welcome is he."

And while he was singing he manifested a strong inclination to come very close to Katie, her companions uttered a loud scream, and held their hands spread over their frames to protect them from stain.

"No, Pauw; get along with you; be quiet, do; you will make our work dirty?" they shrieked.

But Pauw seemed to become suddenly more peaceful and quiet, under the inspiration of the sweet smile which Katie had bestowed on him at sight of the flowers. She well knew that the first gift of the fair May-month was destined for her; her blue eyes beamed with gentle gratitude, and they so touched the young schouwveger, that the song died away on his lips and the laugh from his countenance.

After a while, as though he could not be serious long together, he conquered his emotion, and said, laughingly—

"Katie, I have been roaming about the fields—that is to say from village to village—and I have been singing aep, aep, aep, with all my might, in opposition to the nightingales, until my throat is as rough as a grater. But I met out there a damsel, so beautiful, such a darling; and she was so affectionate to me that I almost— Now, now, don't be sulky, Katie. The damsel asked me, then, whether I had a liking for anybody? I was going to say no, but I didn't like to tell a lie; and when I nodded my head to say yes, she asked me what was the name of the girl I liked better than anybody else. 'Ah,' said I, 'don't you know? Ha, ha, 'tis a little lass like a rose, and her name is Katie.' 'Ah, well,' says the young damsel, 'make my compliments to her, and give her these flowers from me.'"

All the girls were staring at the chimney-sweeper with their mouths open, and a half-incredulous smile on their faces.

"And if you always love each other, in honor and in virtue," said she, then, "I will make you merry every year, and give you all kinds of flowers, as many as you like."

"Who could it have been?" asked the palest of the girls, in amazement.

"You know her well enough, all the time," said Pauw, laughing.

"What is her name, then?"

"Her name is Mademoiselle de May!"

"Mademoiselle de May! I know a Madame de May, who lives round the corner at the dry-salter's, but it can't be her."

"Oh! don't you see the rogue takes us all for fools?" cried Annemie. "He means Mademoiselle de May-month."

"Exactly so; I meant our old acquaintance," said Pauw, still laughing, he gave the fragrant branch of thorn to Katie, and said to another of the girls—

"Trieny, will you have some? Oh, they smell so nice."

The girl reached out her hand, and Pauw struck her gently with the branch.

"Oh, my, you ugly old schouwveger," exclaimed Trieny.

"No rose without a thorn," said Pauw, sportively.

But Trieny was so vexed that she stood up, put her arms akimbo, and assailed him thus:

"Oh, you black, sooty villain, what do you think of yourself? You go roaming about doing nothing, and think you may take any liberty. Go and wash yourself, you dirty nigger. Your father is at home already. Make haste, or you'll catch the rod."

"Look at the little dragon, how well she rides her horse!" said the young sweep, in a mocking tone of voice. "You are not tongue-tied, anyhow, Trieny. Ill-temper doesn't become you—you ought to have a nice pair of moustaches."

And with these words he made a gesture as though he were about to reach the face of the girl with his black fingers; but all the group put on him at once, and overwhelmed him with abuse:

"Hobgoblin! Ugly schouwveger! Sootsack! Aep, aep, aep," and sundry other curious appellations.

Pauw could not bear down the clamor, so he began to beat a retreat, shaking his head from side to side as if he would allow the shafts of their invectives to fly over his shoulders harmless. Then he shouted, at all at once—

"Holloa, my little darlings, I must just make an end of this, and then go and wash myself. Heads up! one, two, three."

At these words he cut five or six capers in the air, and snook his soot-bag so vigorously that he diffused a dark cloud over the scene, singing the while—

"Sing and dance, Pauw, my boy— For nobody can harm you."

All the girls raised their frames and ran off with cries of dismay, lest their work should be stained by the spot. While some running and screaming and laughing and shouting, the schouwveger capered away toward the door of his house, shouting to them—

"Good-by, my dear little turtle-doves! a saw-rot, I'll just go and put on my Sunday face."

CHAPTER II.

The little narrow street had been already for half an hour wrapped in the shades of evening. Mother Smet, the schouwveger's wife, was sitting at a table, and was busy in darning the woolen stockings of her Pauw, by the glimmering of a small lamp. Her clothes were not simply clean—they were more costly than her condition in life would have indicated; for, although she was in her own house, and would not probably go out again for the evening, she wore a rose-colored jacket with little flowers, a cloth gown trimmed with velvet, and a cap white as snow, with stately wings.

Sad or irritating thoughts seemed to be passing through her mind; for very often she would pause in her work, and then her countenance would be clouded with an expression of anger or vexation.

"That's the way they always cheat poor people who happen to have anything left them," she muttered, at length. "They know how to mystify it, and to draw it out, and put it off till the poor legate is dead, and then the rascals quietly put the whole into their own pockets. It makes me mad to think of it. Old Kobe the mason, in the Winkel street—be happened to have a hundred thousand crowns left him; all was quite straight-forward—but they dragged him about backward and forward, from Herod to Pilate, so long, that he died of starvation in his little attic. Six months afterward the inheritance was shared between three or four great men, who didn't want it at all; and I suppose the best part of Kobe's share was left sticking to the fingers of those lawyers. But they shan't treat me so, I can tell them. If it cost me my last farthing, I'll see what has become of the legacy of my aunt in Holland—the precious thieves!"

At this moment her husband came down stairs, blew out the lamp he had in his hand, set it down on a shelf, and then stood with his arms folded, looking with a smile on his amiable wife. The schouwveger's face was now washed quite clean; his clothes were such as were usually worn by the inferior burghers, whenever they went out of an evening to drink a pint of beer with their neighbors.

"I fancy I've pretty well served out the rats in the attic now," said he. "Only guess, Trees, what I have done?"

"Oh, let me alone," answered his wife, in a pet. "You have been serving out the rats these ten years past; but they serve us out the worst. Only leave anything in the attic, and it is only a root-bag, they have knawed it to pieces before morning."

"Well, how can I help it? Do you fancy I can catch all the rats in the city? They are always on the move, and they run along the drains and gutters. They don't take a lease of a house; but if they find themselves well off, there they stay. I saw one morning, Trees, a black fellow with a tail long enough to make a pair of garters of. But, dame, your nose is out of joint to-day; you don't ride your hobby easily. Always these sour looks!"

"I look just as I like."

"To be sure, to be sure—only so much the worse that you do it on purpose. I have noticed all day that you have got a thorn in your foot. Something about lawyers, I fancy, or your aunt in Holland, or legacies, bags of gold, and other castles in the air!"

"'Tis no business of yours. What do you know about it?"

"Well, Trees, listen once for all—quite seriously and without laughing."

"Without laughing? You can't, you merry-andrew, you."

"Well, just listen. We have been married now nearly five-and-twenty years; next year, come St. John-in-the-ol, is our jubilee, our silver wedding-feast. All these years you have been running about after lawyers, and tying up wills, and codicils, and registers—and every month carrying ever so many pretty francs to that little black man. If all this money were in one heap, it would be a snug little inheritance by itself; for there are a good many months in five-and-twenty years. Up to now I have let you do what you liked; but now everything is so confoundedly dear. Potatoes are two francs the sack; meat is so dear that the money I get for sweeping one chimney wouldn't buy enough for us to point at—and bread, bread."

"Yes, surely you care what bread costs," said

"May 6th, a feast in memory of St. John's being cast into a cauldron of seething oil, and coming forth unhurt. The twenty-fifth year of wedded life is the silver jubilee; the fiftieth, the golden."