

STORIES OF POVERTY.

THEIR FATHERS THROUGH THEIR TEARS AND THEIR LIVES.

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VIII.

THE TRUE STORY OF LOTTE BAUER.

It was the Prussian War that seemed to settle the question. So far as Grossvater Bauer himself was concerned, he would still have talked on contentedly. To be alive at all on German soil was more than honor or wealth or any good thing that the emigrant might expect as part of his possession in that America to which all disappointed eyes looked longingly. The reports might all be true, yet why should one for the sake of better food or some money be banished from the Vaterland and have only a President, a man of the people, in place of the old Kaiser, whose very name thrilled the heart, and for whose glory Grossvater Bauer would have given many sons? He had given them. Peace had come and France was paying tribute, and one by one, the few who had escaped French bullets came home to the little Prussian village and told their tales of the siege and of the three who had fallen at Sedan. Grossvater Bauer sat silent. He had been as silent when they brought the news to him in the beginning. It was the fortune of war. He had served his own time, and having served it, accepted as part of his birthright the same necessity for his own. They had worked side by side with him on the great farm where he had been for most of his life head laborer and almost master; worked contentedly until Annchen, the eldest of all, had married a sailor, dissatisfied like all tailors, and set sail for the strange country where fortunes had always open hands for all the world. He had prospered, and in Annchen's letters, coming at rare intervals, was always an appeal to them to come over. The boys listened doubtfully at first, for the father's faith was strong in them that no land could ever hold the same good as this land through which the Rhine flowed to the sea. But as the time came when they must enter the army there was rebellion. Here and there, in the air it seemed, for no one could say from whence the new feeling had come, were questions the sound of which was not to be tolerated by any true Prussian. Why should this great army live on the toil of the peasant? Why should the maintenance of these conscripts swallow up every possible saving in the wages and be the largest item save one in the year's expenses? Why should there be a standing army at all?

Hans, when his time came, had learned to ask, but he had not learned to answer. The splendor of his uniform appeared to be in some sort a reply, and its lightness may also have had its effect in restricting his mental operations. For three years he carefully kept accounts of Grossvater Bauer held the item "Maintenance of son in army, \$121.37." Then Hans came home and married Lieschen, the little dairy maid, and in due time Lotte's blue eyes opened on the world whose mysteries were still not quite explicable to the heavy father. Wilhelm and Frans had taken their turn and in spite of questions settled passively at last into the farm life. Then came the war, the war that called for every man with strength to carry a gun, and when it was over Lotte was fatherless and there were no more sons to bear the name, or to trouble Grossvater Bauer's mind with further questions.

Very glorious, but what use if there were no boys left to whom the story could be told? If he had yielded, if even one had crossed the sea, there would be something still to live for. But Lieschen had given them no boys. He thought of it day after day, till the familiar fields grew hateful and he wished only to escape from the land to which he had paid a tax too heavy for mortal endurance. There was no one but Lieschen and her little ones, Lotte first of all and best beloved, and in another month they had set sail and the old life was over.

"Work for all, homes for all, plenty for all," Annchen had written how many times. Yes now, when the Grossvater appeared and the round-eyed Lieschen and her tribe of five, Petershock his head. He had prospered, it is true. From journeyman tailor he had become master on a small scale and packed himself and his men into a shop so tiny that it was miraculous how elbow-room remained to use the goose. But work for the Grossvater was quite another thing. He had no trade, and while his capacity as farmer on scientific methods ought to give him paying employment in the country, the city held nothing for him. Work for Lieschen and Lotte was easy. A week or two of apprenticeship would teach them all that need be known to do the work on cheap coats or pantaloon, but even for them it was certain that the country would be better.

It was here that Grossvater Bauer developed unexpected obstinacy. He had a little money. He was still strong and in good case. Here was this great city which must have work of some nature and which, so far from weighing upon him as Lotte had feared, seemed to have for him a curious intoxication. He haunted the wharves. The smell of the sea and the tarred ropes of the ships bewitched him, and on the wharves he soon found work, and loaded and unloaded all day contentedly, with a feeling that this was after all more like living than anything could have been in the home fields where only the ghosts of his own remained to have place at his side.

It is now only that the story of Lotte begins, Lotte who pined for the great farm and the fields across which the wind swept, and the cows she had named and cared for. Her mother forgot, or did not care. She had never loved her work and liked better to chatter with the other women in the house, or even to run the machine hour after hour, than to milk or feed the cattle, or churn. Lotte hated the machine. Her back ached, her eyes burned and her head throbbled after only an hour or two of it. "Let me take a place," she begged, but the Grossvater shook his head angrily. This was a free country. There was no heed that she should serve. Let her learn to be contented and thankful that she could earn so much. For with their simple habits the wages paid in 1891 seemed wealth. Forty-five cents a pair, three of which she could make in a day, brought the week's earnings to \$5, sometimes to \$6; and Peter prophesied that it might even be \$10 or \$12. Lieschen had as much. Down on the wharves the Grossvater earned sometimes \$18 a week. It was a fortune. At home, in the best of times, with sons and daughters all at work, his books, which he kept always with the accuracy of a merchant, showed something under \$1,000 a year as receipts, the expenses hardly varying from the \$736.28 which represented the maintenance of the family during Hans's first year as soldier. Their food ration at home had been 9 1/2 cents daily. Wheat bread had stood for festivals and high days. Black bread, cabbage soup, beer, cheese and sausage with meat on Sundays had been their only ambition as to food, and here, Grossvater Bauer insisted upon the same regimen, and frowned as one by one the fashions of the new country crept in. Peter had been right after all. One must work, it is true, but no harder and no longer, and the return was double. The little iron chest which had held the savings at home held them here, and at rare intervals the Grossvater allowed Lotte to look, and said as he turned over the shining coins "Thou wilt have met, my Lotchen. It is for thee that I put them away."

"There is enough for a little farm," Lotte said one day. "We could go on this Long Island and have land, and not be shut all day in these dark rooms."

"That is slower," the Grossvater said. "We will go back with much money when it is earned, and I shall be owner, and then Lotte, the mistress, and Frans may be will go also."

Lotte shook her head, though her cheeks were pink.

"Frans earn only for America," she said. "Come with me some day, Grossvater, and let us look at the little house he knows. There is land, two acres, and a barn and a cow, and all for so little. I could become a farmer."

"That is silly," the old man said angrily. "It would be no selling them, where here is a dollar a week and you will see."

Lotte looked after him wondering as he turned away. He never was becoming to promises. He seemed to have her about him, but she did not know.

She had many eyes, and she looked on the old man with a steady gaze, and her face was not under with every word. From the eye of the old man she saw that he had not forgotten her, and she felt, and would not let her show it, that every day, even if it was only labor in the market garden and on the farm. There were minutes when Lotte nearly yielded, but the Grossvater seemed to hold her as with chains. She loved him and she had always submitted. Perhaps in time he would yield and learn again to care for the old life of the country.

At last a change came, but there was in it no reason, only slower improvement. Peter and Annchen had followed a brother to Chicago and opened a shop double the size of the old one, and they were hardly settled when Lieschen sickened suddenly and after long illness died. For many weeks there was no earning. Even the angry Grossvater saw that it was impossible, and doled out reluctantly the money they had helped him to save. Lieschen had always fretted him. Lotte was the best gift she had ever made the Bauer name, and when the sickness was over, he went home, secretly relieved that the long watch was over; went home to find that the precious chest, hidden always under piles of bedding in the closet where he locked his own possessions, had disappeared. There had been a moving from the story above. Men had gone up and down for an hour and no one had noticed specially what was carried. There was no clew, even after days of searching and Grossvater Bauer who had rushed madly to the police station hunted it now, with imploring questions, till told they could do nothing and that he must keep away. He sank then into the sort of apathy that had held him when the news came from Sedan. He went to his work, but there was no heart in it, and eat by the fire when night came, with only an impatient shake of the head when Lotte tried to comfort him. Till then no one had realized his age, but now his hair whitened and his broad shoulders bowed. He was an old man, and Lotte said to herself that his earnings days were nearly over, and worked an hour or two later that the week's gain might be a little larger and so comfort him.

She came home one afternoon with her bundle of work, Gretchen was nearly thirteen and had helped her carry it, and had shrunk back frightened as the foreman put a finger under her chin, and nodded smilingly at the peach-like face and the great blue eyes. Lotte struck down his hand passionately. She knew better than Gretchen what the smile meant. The child should never know if she could help it, and she did not mind the evil glance that followed her toward the door. There were people standing at their doors, as she went slowly up the stairs, her breath coming quickly as now it always did when she climbed them.

"Poor soul!" one of them said. "She little knows what she's coming to."
"Was ist los?" Lotte cried as the door opened and then shrieked aloud, for the Grossvater lay there on the bed, crushed and disfigured and almost speechless, but lifting one hand feebly as she flew toward him.

"A sugar boghead," somebody said. "It rolled over him when he thought it was firm and brought down some barrels with it. He's past helping. May the saints have a heart for the poor children. He would be brought here, but what will you do with him?"

"There'll be naught to do by morning," said another. "Can't you see he's going!" But by morning no change had come, nor for many mornings. The wounds and bruises slowly healed, but save for the one hand that moved toward her, there were no signs of life. The strong body held by paralysis might linger for years, and Lotte must earn for him and for all. Even then a living might have been possible, for Gretchen had a place as cash-girl and earned two dollars a week, and Lisa was promised one after New Year's. But it was a hard winter. They ate only what they must, and Lotte's blue eyes looked out from hollow sockets, and she shivered with cold. Wages had fallen, and they fell faster and faster till by January her ten and twelve hours' work brought her but six dollars instead of the eight or nine she had always earned. The foreman she hated made everything as difficult as possible. Though the bundle came ready from the cutting-room, he had managed more than once to slip out some essential piece, and thus lessened her week's wages, no price being paid where a garment was returned unfinished. He had often done this where girls had refused his advances, yet it was impossible to make complaint. The great house on Canal-st. left these matters entirely with him and regarded complaint as mere blackmailing. Lotte tried often, but wages were even less. She was sure of work here, and pay was prompt. With the spring things must be better. But long before the spring Lisa had sickened and died, and Lotte buried her in the Potter's Field, and hurried home to make up the lost time, and hush the crying little one as she could. It did not occur to her that she could write to Annchen and ask for help, and Frans had quarrelled with her because she did not put the Grossvater in an hospital and send the children to some asylum.

"I will even marry you with the children," he said, "but never with the Grossvater who hindered and spoiled everything."

"He has cared for me always, even when he was hard," said Lotte. "I shall care for him now," and Frans rushed away and had care no more.

For a year Lotte's struggle went on. She knew only the one form of work, and she dared not take time to learn another.

"If it were not for the Grossvater," she said, "and the children, I should have a place and work in the country and grow strong, but I cannot. If I die before them what can they do?"

There was other trouble. Gretchen's light little head could never guard her pretty face. She was fourteen now and tall and fair, fretting against the narrow life and refusing to stay indoors when evening came. One day she did not come home and when Lotte sought her she saw only the evil smile and triumphant eyes of the foreman who had followed her a year ago and who laughed in her face as he shut the door.

"You'd better come in yourself," he called. "You'd fare better if you did."

Lotte went home dumb and sat down at her machine. There was no money in the house, nor would be till she had taken home this work, but as she bent over it the blood poured in a stream from her mouth. She tried to rise, but fell back, and when the screaming children had brought in neighbors, Lotte's struggle was quite over. When they had buried her in the Potter's Field by Lisa, they took the bundle of work stained with her life blood and carried it back to its owners.

"She'll need no more," said the old neighbor from the floor above as she laid it on the counter. "You've cut her down and cut her down, till there wasn't life left to stand it longer. There's not one of you to blame, you say, but I that know, know you've fastened her coffin lid with nails o' your own makin', an' that sooner or later you'll come back on us, an' find that red-hot is cold to see how they're makin' ready for you. An' as for him that stands there smilin', if it weren't for the laws that spare the guilty and send the innocent to their deaths, God knows it would be the best thing these hands ever did to tear him to bits. But there's no one to blame. Ye're sure o' that. Wait a while. The day's comin' when you'll maybe think different, an' may God speed it!"