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The Mother's Story

Ada Nield Chew

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The loop-line train pursued its way from one end of the Five Towns and their environs to the other. It made a duty call at a northern outpost where the pit-shafts dotted the countryside, and into my compartment came three workaday women, looking a little blown and battered with their conflict with the north-east gale. As is the way of village dwellers, they were known to each other, and, as is the way with most of us, their thoughts were much coloured by daily environment.

'This is a strong wind, isn't it?' asked one of the other. 'An' I bet you'll feel it where you live, too.'
(They lived in a colliery village, at the top of a hill.)

'Yes,' replied the one addressed. 'You can't shut our back door with your hands when there's a wind like this. You have to turn round and put your back against it and push with all your might. An' when it rains, the water pours under the door in a flood. Many a time when the children come down of a winter's morning they put their feet into it; and whenever it rains I always have to mop up bucketsful.'

The others looked their understanding of and commiseration with the situation.

'And what about the dirt and dust on a day like this?' demanded one of them. 'Can you keep clean? If you never have a brush and duster out of your hand, can you keep clean?'

Both the others made solemn assertions as to the impossibility of 'any woman alive' being able to cope with the havoc made by the wind on a day like this. The train had meanwhile transferred us a couple of miles further south, where the pit-shafts were now interspersed with pot-banks. We stopped at the most northern of the Five Towns, and the women left me. It was market day, and each had a basket or a bag.

The vision of their lives, of which they had given me a glimpse, remained. I knew that colliery village in which they live as one knows vitally only one spot – that in which one's life took root. I know the houses where their daily battle with dirt is waged. The 'house-place', about four yards square, door opening on to the village street, a little kitchen beyond, with absurdly inadequate cooking apparatus; backdoor opening, maybe, onto a tiny tiled yard, or, quite as likely, onto an open waste, exposed to the bleak countryside and the pit-brows. Imagine the wind sweeping through, leaving in its trail clouds of dirt and coal-shag, covering the beds, the table, the clothes, the cupboard shelves, the food! No, verily, a woman could not cope adequately with housing conditions such as these, though she were a ministering angel from heaven, and not a mere human woman of the earth.

The train stopped again, and there was my temporary destination. The cruel wind swept round every corner of every mean street, taking its tribute of pot-bank dust over every cottage doorway, and as I took my way from one part of the town to the other, I fell a-thinking again of the war of women with dirt, and realised afresh the impossibility of individual women in individual homes dealing with so huge and vital a problem as this. To settle this in which is woven the health and wellbeing of the race, women will have to act together, in association. This is pre-eminently their problem. Oh, for the power to deal with it! Turning a corner, I saw a woman approaching. Mutual recognition followed.

'Well, Mrs.– , ' I said. 'How are you – and how's Polly?'

Mrs.– forgot to mention herself in her haste to tell me about Polly.

'Oh,' said she, 'she's got it over – three weeks ago – a boy.' Her face beamed with satisfaction, which, however, was soon overshadowed by another thought. 'She was bad – awful bad. But she's better now.'

'Well?' I asked, in answer to the shadow on her face. She knew, and I knew, that there was more behind. She came close to me and whispered something. Neither she nor I was surprised at the news – the doom pronounced by the doctor in attendance could have been foretold by ourselves. But she was the girl's mother, and mothers cannot reconcile themselves without a struggle to the destruction of the life which has drawn its life from them. I understood, and she knew it. But what is there to say when one comes straight up against the tragedy of a lacerated mother's heart?

'Well,' I said after a pause. 'Go and get your paper,' [Certificate of incapacity from certifying surgeon.] 'I'll be here when you come back.' She went, surreptitiously wiping her eye on the corner of her apron. Presently she returned, no longer shrinking under her load of woe, but with the light of battle in her eye. I looked enquiringly.

'He asked if it was not time Polly was coming for her own paper!' she said indignantly. 'And I said, "She will as soon as she can walk again!" "It's a pity she got married," he said, and I said, "What else was there for her to do when she fell on compensation?" The 5s 4d a week won't keep her, and I'm a widow with four other children not working. How could I keep her? I miss her wages bad enough – even though she did only get 11 shillings a week. She had to get married to get kept, that's what she had to do!'

'Never mind!' I said. 'You weren't afraid of him, anyhow. You told him the truth!'

Smiles shone through her tears.

'Yes,' she said. 'What does he know about keeping a family on what you can get for washing?'

She left me, and as I went on my way thoughts of her and the girl filled my mind. I had known them nearly two years – ever since the girl contracted lead poisoning. I saw again the bonnie girl, who had not then lost all traces of the buoyancy and health of her childhood, of which her mother had told me. But even then the girl was developing a cough, and the doctors said there was lung trouble. The little cottage was always full of steam and soapy odours, for the mother's work had to go on all the week, in order to earn enough to keep the children. The steam made the girl cough, and the atmosphere was, of course, the worst possible for her. Then came a visit to a sanatorium. How much we hoped from that! The people at the chapel – for she is a good living girl – and others were all kind, and helped in different ways, and I heard of the 'young man' accompanying her on a portion of the journey.

She came back better. But the home conditions have been too much for her, and she has lapsed – that and the deadly poison which she took into her system whilst earning her 11 shillings a week.

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Then I heard of her marriage, and my last memory of them before this encounter was of the girl, now soon to be a mother, struggling with her cough in the steamy atmosphere, not made any more wholesome by the rain which was pouring down the walls, and making a little pool in one corner of the room; the ever cheerful mother at her washtubs, and the shy young man sitting in another corner. He had come to live here as a matter of course because her mother could not keep going without even the little help which the girl's compensation means; and he, loving the girl, wanted to help, and this was the obvious way to help best – or so it seemed to them.

How dare we women, whose lives are not cast where the shadows are so deep, judge the conduct of women whose whole lives call for a constant exercise of heroism? Rather should we resolve to treat the problem of downtrodden womanhood like the woman who shut her door against the north wind – we should turn round and put our backs against it. But this door – the door opening on to want and misery and injustice – cannot be shut by one woman's efforts. We must stand all together, and refuse to tolerate a world where women's lives are so cheap.