

To Poverty

Lizzie M. Holmes

1902

Poverty! Miserable curse of a plenteous earth, what horrors are conjured at your name! Shameful shadow falling like a pall over the bright glow civilization would boastfully send forth, you darken every dream of beauty and purity that mortal dares to dwell upon! You drive him to despair, you hound him to the prison door, you call forth the evil within to fight your encroachments, and you crush to earth his aspirations, his genius. Needless, hideous phantom that you are—thing created, not of nature but of men—what mystical words will banish you forever? Has the whole race lost the key to your existence? Is there no “Presto, change!” in the vocabulary of suffering humanity that will change you into something less like the fantasma of black art? You have no excuse for being! You push your ugly shadow around under the caves of palaces, beneath the richest storehouses and thru the grandest, wealthiest streets, with the audacity of Satan! You go and brood like a great bird of prey over the green, fertile fields of the farmer! You sit like a great grim specter on the hearth of the man who digs more wealth than a hundred like him can use! You are the hated but familiar acquaintance of desolate, tired, workworn women; and you make little fiends, idiots and automata of the children who should be frisking and laughing all day long in the glad sunshine. You are the most brazen-faced curse the world knows for you act as tho we wanted you and there was no such thing as proceeding without you.

You have no business here! Nature planned her arrangements with the express purpose of keeping you out of her domains. Man us strong enough to crush your wicked shadow into atoms—if he could grasp you. But you see that he does not do that. You are the evil genius called up by many methods and in so many different shapes that neither you, nor your conjurors can be seized in a firm, sure grip. You will not assume a definite form, nor tell what master summoned you, and thus you elude while you haunt and torture us all. Where you cannot creep, you send a dim, terrible resemblance of yourself—a specter that can go where it will—in the palace, in the quiet home, in the counting rooms where gold is heaped; that can drive men to deeds even you cannot evoke, that can crush love, affection, beauty and truth from the soul of man. It is the FEAR of you!

We spend so much time studying you, you monster! We puzzle over the problem of where you came from, and how you came, and how we can annihilate you, as we never puzzled over our schoolday problems. We devote a great deal of thought and learning to you; we analyze, pick you to pieces, turn you over and over; and some of us, seeing how inevitable you are, try to make out you are not so hideous after all, probably a blessing in disguise—always for somebody else

however, never for ourselves. No individual ever gave you a welcome for himself. Oh, you are an important monster, you get notice enough—and that with your impudence, is what you want. Some of us have an idea of how you sneaked into the world, and how it is you keep your grip here so well. And we will go on until we find a way to kill you. Some believe they can conquer you in their own cases; but they only drive you away from themselves, you still exist and you torment other poor wretches all the more for exempting the few. Nothing but your utter destruction will answer, we will not be satisfied with your temporary banishment—we must have your execution! We have designs on you. Wait until we—not know you better, heavens! we know you but too well now, but until we learn all your weak points, and what pulls the strings which direct your baleful creepings. When more of mankind are awakened, your doom is sealed!

We are very philosophic about you—we who have studied you. We can discuss you in the abstract with great composure. But the miserable little details of every day life, where you creep about and pinch and annoy and distract us—ah! there you have us yet! The mean way you have of crowding in calculations of the grocer's bill and the contents of one's slim purse between the lines of one's best literary efforts; of mixing up plans, of making our clothes last thru another season with the constructive elements of an elaborate essay; of tearing away the halo which a feebly growing renown is building up about one's commonplaceness,—here is where your power over us never wanes.

I used to imagine as a child, a king always sitting in State on his throne with a crown on his head and a scepter in his hand; I could not imagine him in any other situation. I think most people weave about the personality of an author a sort of halo of glory or blessedness, and imagine him or her as always sitting at an elegant rosewood desk, in fine composure, ready at a moment's notice to receive visitors and be able to talk as well as they write. But you—you miserable desecrator of all beautiful fancies, you tear away the halo with fiendish laughter; you will show him up to some admiring visitor splitting wood at the back door in a ragged coat, or sifting ashes, the dustiest, shabbiest, forlornest object in the world. And your hateful, unbanishable ghost stalking at his side makes him forget his own powers and ability, and to talk like an idiot. To a woman, your own shadow is heavier and darker. She may succeed in weaving many sweet fancies about her personality in others' minds; but when you, you ghoul, hover over her, let them come closer and she is found to be only a plain, shabby, stammering woman scrubbing the floor as stupidly as your stupidest victim.

Not always do you cause the greatest suffering where you do your worst work. Your victims starve and freeze to death; they pine in prisons and die in gutters; but often they feel no more exquisite pangs of pain than do those spirits who rendered sensitive by the civilization which pretends it cannot do without you, are made to feel by your modified, ceaseless presence.

No, you have no acceptable excuse for crowding among us uninvited. The world is bounteous, labor is generous, crying aloud for opportunity, yet here you come, tagging along after wealth as tho you were its shadow; tho of course if wealth must be piled into enormous heaps, it will cast just such hideous shadows. But you're not wanted! And when enough of us realize that you do not belong here, and that even wealth does not want you—REMEMBER! OUT YOU GO!!

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