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Woman's Trials Or, Tales and Sketches from the Life around Us

T. S. (Timothy Shay) Arthur

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WOMAN'S TRIALS
OR
TALES AND SKETCHES FROM THE LIFE
AROUND US

BY

T. S. ARTHUR

PHILADELPHIA
1851

PREFACE.

THE title of this volume sufficiently indicates its purpose. The stories of which it is composed have been mainly written with the end of creating for woman, in the various life-trials through which she has to pass, sympathy and true consideration, as well in her own sex as in ours. We are all too much engrossed in what concerns ourselves—in our own peculiar wants, trials, and sufferings—to give that thought to others which true humanity should inspire. To the creator of fictitious histories is, therefore, left the task of reminding us of our duty, by presenting pictures from the world of life around us—moving pictures, in which we may not only see the effect of our actions upon others, but also the relations of others to society, and thus learn to sympathize with the tried and the tempted, the suffering and the oppressed, the grief-stricken and the mourner. It is good for us, at times, to forget ourselves; to think of others and feel a heart-warm interest in all that concerns them. If the perusal of this volume has such an effect upon the reader's mind, it will accomplish all that its author desires; for right feeling is but the prompter to right action.

This book is to be followed, immediately, by other volumes, to the number of twelve, printed in uniform style: the series, when complete, to be called, "ARTHUR'S LIBRARY FOR THE HOUSEHOLD."

"MARRIED LIFE," the volume to come after this, is passing through the press, and will be ready for publication in a few days.

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A LESSON OF PATIENCE.

I WAS very unhappy, from a variety of causes, definable and undefinable. My chambermaid had been cross for a week, and, by talking to my cook, had made her dissatisfied with her place. The mother of five little children, I felt that I had a weight of care and responsibility greater than I could support. I was unequal to the task. My spirits fell under its bare contemplation. Then I had been disappointed in a seamstress, and my children were, as the saying is, "in rags." While brooding over these and other disheartening circumstances, Netty, my chambermaid, opened the door of the room where I was sitting, (it was Monday morning,) and said —

"Harriet has just sent word that she is sick, and can't come to-day."

"Then you and Agnes will have to do the washing," I replied, in a fretful voice; this new source of trouble completely breaking me down.

"Indeed, ma'am," replied Netty, tossing her head and speaking with some pertness, "I can't do the washing. I didn't engage for any thing but chamber-work."

And so saying she left me to my own reflections. I must own to feeling exceedingly angry, and rose to ring the bell for Netty to return, in order to tell her that she could go to washing or leave the house, as best suited her fancy. But the sudden recollection of a somewhat similar collision with a former chambermaid, in which I was worsted, and compelled to do my own chamber-work for a week, caused me to hesitate, and, finally, to sit down and indulge in a hearty fit of crying.

When my husband came home at dinnertime, things did not seem very pleasant for him, I must own. I had on a long, a very long face — much longer than it was when he went away in the morning.

"Still in trouble, I see, Jane," said he. "I wish you would try and take things a little more cheerfully. To be unhappy about what is

not exactly agreeable doesn't help the matter any, but really makes it worse."

"If you had to contend with what I have to contend with, you wouldn't talk about things being *exactly agreeable*," I replied to this. "It is easy enough to talk. I only wish you had a little of my trouble; you wouldn't think so lightly of it."

"What is the great trouble now, Jane?" said my husband, without being at all fretted with my unamiable temper. "Let us hear. Perhaps I can suggest a remedy."

"If you will get me a washerwoman, you will exceedingly oblige me," said I.

"Where is Harriet?" he asked.

"She is sick, or pretends to be, I don't know which."

"Perhaps she will be well enough to do your washing tomorrow," suggested my husband.

"Perhaps is a poor dependence."

I said this with a tartness that ill repaid my husband's effort to comfort me. I saw that he felt the unkindness of my manner, in the slight shade that passed over his face.

"Can't you get some one else to do your washing this week?"

I made no reply. The question was easily asked. After that, my husband was silent, — silent in that peculiar way that I understood, too well, as the effect of my words, or tones, or state of mind. Here was another cause for unhappiness, in the reflection that I had disturbed my husband's peace.

I am sure that I did not much look like a loving wife and mother as I presided at the dinner table that day. The children never seemed so restless and hard to manage; and I could not help speaking to them, every now and then, "as if I would take their heads off;" but to little good effect.

After my husband went away on finishing his dinner, I went to bed, and cried for more than half the afternoon. Oh! how wretched I felt! Life seemed an almost intolerable burden.

Then my mind grew more composed, and I tried to think about what was to be done. The necessity for having the clothes washed was absolute; and this roused me, at length, as the most pressing domestic duty, into thinking so earnestly, that I presently rang the bell for Netty, who came in her own good time.

"Tell Agnes that I want to see her," said I, not in a very good-natured way.

The effect was that Netty left the chamber without replying, and slammed the door hard after her, which mark of disrespect set my blood to boiling. In a little while my cook made her appearance.

"Agnes," said I, "do you know of any one that can get to do the washing this week?"

Agnes thought for a few moments, and then replied —

"There's a poor woman who lives near my mother's. I think she goes out to wash sometimes."

"I wish you would step round and see if she can't come here tomorrow."

Agnes said that she would do so.

"Tell her she must come," said I.

"Very well, ma'am."

And Agnes withdrew.

In an hour she came back, and said that she had seen the woman, who promised to come.

"What is her name?" I asked.

"Mrs. Partridge," was answered.

"You think she won't disappoint me?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. I don't think Mrs. Partridge is the kind of a woman to promise and then disappoint a person."

It was some relief to think I was going to get my washing done; but the idea of having the ironing about all the week fretted my mind. And no sooner was this leading trouble set aside, than I began to worry about the children's clothes, and the prospect of losing

my cook, who had managed my kitchen more to my satisfaction than any one had ever done before.

The promise for a pleasant hour at home was but little more flattering to my husband, when he returned in the evening, than it had been at dinner time. I was still in a sombre mood.

In the morning Mrs. Partridge came early and commenced the washing. There was something in this woman's appearance that interested me, and something in her face that reminded me of somebody I had seen before; but when and where I could not tell. Although her clothes were poor and faded, there was nothing common about her, and she struck me as being superior to her class. Several times during the morning I had to go into the kitchen where she was at work, and each time her appearance impressed me more and more. An emotion of pity arose in my bosom, as I saw her bending over the washing tub, and remembered that, for this hard labour during a whole day, the pay was to be but seventy-five cents. And yet there was an air of meek patience, if not contentment, in her face; while I, who had every thing from which I ought to have derived happiness, was dissatisfied and full of trouble. While in her presence I felt rebuked for my complaining spirit.

At dinner time Mrs. Partridge came to my room, and with a gentle, patient smile on her face, said —

"If you have no objections, ma'am, I would like to run home for a few minutes to nurse my baby and give the children something to eat. I'll make up the time."

"Go by all means," I replied, with an effort to speak calmly.

The woman turned, and went quickly away.

"Run home to nurse the baby and give the children something to eat!" The words went through and through me. So unexpected a request, revealing, as it did, the existence of such biting poverty in one who was evidently bearing her hard lot without a murmur, made me feel ashamed of myself for complaining at things which I ought to have borne with a cheerful spirit. I had a comfortable, in fact a luxurious, home, a kind and provident husband, and servants to do every thing in my house. There was no lack of the means for procuring every natural good I might reasonably desire. But, be-

tween the means and the attainment of the natural blessings I sought, there were many obstacles; and, instead of going to work in a cheerful, confident spirit to remove those obstacles, I suffered their interposition to make me unhappy; and not me alone, but my husband and all around me. But here was a poor woman, compelled to labour hard with her hands before she could obtain even the means for supplying nature's most pressing wants, doing her duty with an earnest, resigned, and hopeful spirit!

"It is wicked in me to feel as I do," I could not help saying, as I made an effort to turn away from the picture that was before me.

When Mrs. Partridge came back, which was in about half an hour, I said to her —

"Did you find all safe at home?"

"Yes, ma'am, thank you," she answered cheerfully.

"How old is your baby?"

"Eleven months old, ma'am."

"Is your husband living?"

"No, ma'am; he died more than a year ago."

"How many children have you?"

"Four."

"All young?"

"Yes, ma'am. The oldest is only in her tenth year, but she is a good little girl, and takes care of the baby for me almost as well as a grown person. I don't know what I would do without her."

"But ain't you afraid to leave them all at home alone, for so long a time?"

"No, ma'am. Jane takes excellent care of them, and she is so kind that they will obey her as well as they do me. I don't know what in the world I would do without her. I am certainly blessed in having so good a child."

"And only in her tenth year!" said I — the image of my Alice coming before my mind, with the thought of the little use she would be as a nurse and care-taker of her younger brothers and sisters.

"She is young, I know," returned the washerwoman— "too young to be confined down as much as she is. But then she is a very patient child, and knows that her mother has a great deal to do. I often wish it was easier for her; though, as it can't be helped, I don't let it fret me, for you know that would do no good."

"But how in the world, Mrs. Partridge," said I, "do you manage to provide for four children, and do for them at the same time?"

"I find it hard work," she replied; "and sometimes I feel discouraged for a little while; but by patience and perseverance I manage to get along."

Mrs. Partridge went to her washing, and I sat down in my comfortable room, having a servant in every department of my family, and ample means for the supply of every comfort and luxury I could reasonably desire.

"If she can get along by patience and perseverance," said I to myself, "it's a shame for me that I can't." Still, for all this, when I thought of losing my cook through the bad influence of Netty, the chambermaid, I felt worried; and thinking about this, and what I should do for another cook, and the trouble always attendant upon bringing a new domestic into the house, made me, after a while, feel almost as unhappy as before. It was not long before Netty came into my room, saying, as she did so—

"Mrs. Smith, what frock shall I put on Alice?"

"The one with a blue sprig," I replied.

"That's in the wash," was answered.

"In the wash!" said I, in a fretful tone. "How came it in the wash?"

"It was dirty."

"No, it wasn't any such thing. It would have done very well for her to put on as a change to-day and to-morrow."

"Well, ma'am, it's in the wash, and no help for it now," said Netty, quite pertly.

I was dreadfully provoked with her, and had it on my tongue to order her to leave my presence instantly. But I choked down my rising indignation.

"Take the red and white one, then," said I.

"The sleeve's nearly torn off of that. There isn't any one that she can wear except her white muslin."

"Oh dear! It's too bad! What shall I do? The children are all in rags and tatters!"

And in this style I fretted away for three or four minutes, while Netty stood waiting for my decision as to what Alice was to wear.

"Shall she put on the white muslin?" she at length asked.

"No, indeed! Certainly not! A pretty condition she'd have it in before night! Go and get me the red and white frock, and I will mend it. You ought to have told me it was torn this morning. You knew there was nothing for the child to put on ut this. I never saw such a set as you are!"

Netty flirted away, grumbling to herself. When she came in, she threw the frock into my lap with manner so insolent and provoking that I could hardly keep from breaking out upon her and rating her soundly. One thing that helped to restrain me was the recollection of sundry ebullitions of a like nature that had neither produced good effects nor left my mind in a state of much self-respect or tranquillity.

I repaired the torn sleeve, while Netty stood by. It was the work of but five minutes.

"Be sure," said I, as I handed the garment to Netty, "to see that one of Alice's frocks is ironed first thing to-morrow morning."

The girl heard, of course, but she made no answer. That was rather more of a condescension than she was willing to make just then.

Instead of thinking how easily the difficulty of the clean frock for Alice had been gotten over, I began fretting myself because I had not been able to procure a seamstress, although the children were "all in rags and tatters."

"What is to be done?" I said, half crying, as I began to rock myself backward and forward in the great rocking-chair. "I am out of all heart." For an hour I continued to rock and fret myself, and then

came to the desperate resolution to go to work and try what I could do with my own hands. But where was I to begin? What was I to take hold of first? All the children were in rags.

"Not one of them has a decent garment to his back," said I.

So, after worrying for a whole hour about what I should do, and where I should begin, I abandoned the idea of attempting any thing myself, in despair, and concluded the perplexing debate by taking another hearty crying-spell. The poor washerwoman was forgotten during most of this afternoon. My own troubles were too near the axis of vision, and shut out all other objects.

The dusky twilight had begun to fall, and I was still sitting idly in my chamber, and as unhappy as I could be. I felt completely discouraged. How *was* I to get along? I had been trying for weeks, in vain, to get a good seamstress; and yet had no prospect of obtaining one. I was going to lose my cook, and, in all probability, my chambermaid. What would I do? No light broke in through the cloudy veil that overhung my mind. The door opened, and Agnes, who had come up to my room, said —

"Mrs. Partridge is done."

I took out my purse, and had selected therefrom the change necessary to pay the washerwoman, when a thought of her caused me to say —

"Tell Mrs. Partridge to come up and see me."

My thoughts and feelings were changing. By the time the washerwoman came in, my interest in her was alive again.

"Sit down," said I, to the tired-looking creature who sank into a chair, evidently much wearied.

"It's hard work, Mrs. Partridge," said I.

"Yes, ma'am, it is rather hard. But I am thankful for health and strength to enable me to go through with it. I know some poor women who have to work as hard as I do, and yet do not know what it is to feel well for an hour at a time."

"Poor creatures!" said I. "It is very hard! How in the world can they do it?"

"We can do a great deal, ma'am, when it comes the pinch; and it is much pleasanter to do, I find, than to think about it. If I were to think much I should give up in despair. But I pray the Lord each morning to give me my daily bread, and thus far he has done it, and will, I am sure, continue to do it to the end."

"Happy it is for you that you can so think and feel," I replied. "But I am sure I could not be as you are, Mrs. Partridge. It would kill me."

"I sincerely trust, ma'am, that you will never be called to pass through what I have," said Mrs. Partridge. "And yet there are those who have it still harder. There was a time when the thought of being as poor as I now am, and of having to work so hard, would have been terrible to me; and yet I do not know that I was so very much happier then than I am now, though I confess I ought to have been. I had full and plenty of every thing brought into the house by my husband, and had only to dispense in my family the blessings of God sent to us. But I let things annoy me then more than they do now."

"But how can you help being worried, Mrs. Partridge? To be away from my children as you have been away from yours all day would set me wild. I would be sure some of them would be killed or dreadfully hurt."

"Children are wonderfully protected," said Mrs. Partridge, in a confident voice.

"So they are. But to think of four little children, the youngest eleven months and the oldest not ten years old, left all alone, for a whole day!"

"It is bad when we think about it, I know," returned Mrs. Partridge. "It looks very bad! But I try and put that view of it out of my mind. When I leave them in the morning they say they will be good children. At dinner time I sometimes find them all fast asleep or playing about. I never find them crying, or at all unhappy. Jane loves the younger ones, and keeps them pleased all the time. In the evening, when I get back from my work, there is generally no one awake but Jane. She has given them the bread and milk I left for their suppers, and undressed and put them to bed."

"Dear little girl! What a treasure she must be!" I could not help saying.

"She is, indeed. I don't see how I could get along without her."

"You could not get along at all."

"Oh, yes, ma'am, I could. Some way would be provided for me," was the confident reply.

I looked into the poor woman's face with wonder and admiration. So patient, so trustful, and yet so very poor. The expression of her countenance was beautiful in its calm religious hope, and it struck me more than ever as familiar.

"Did I ever see you before, Mrs. Partridge?" I asked.

"Indeed, ma'am, I don't know. I am sure I have seen you somewhere. No, now I recollect; it is your likeness to a young schoolmate that makes your face so familiar. How much you do favour her, now I look at you more closely."

"What was her name?" I asked.

"Her name was Flora S— —."

"Indeed! Why, that was my name!"

"Your name! Did you go to Madame Martier's school?"

"I did."

"And can you indeed be my old schoolmate, Flora S— —?"

"My maiden name was Flora S— —, and I went to Madame Martier's. Your face is also familiar, but how to place you I do not know."

"Don't you remember Helen Sprague?"

"Helen Sprague! This can't be Helen Sprague, surely! Yes! I remember now. Why, Helen?" and I stepped forward and grasped her hand. "I am both glad and sorry to see you. To think that, after the lapse of fifteen years, we should meet thus! How in the world is it that fortune has been so unkind to you? I remember hearing it said that you had married very well."