

The Storyteller

THE GRATITUDE OF KITTIE

Hilda was stolidly dipping chocolate creams when Kittie looked toward her down the long table and wondered if she had heard the news. But Hilda's head with its flaxen braids, was bent steadily over her work and betrayed no emotion. Like a well-regulated machine she lifted the soft, white centres, dropped them into the pan of melted chocolate that was kept at the right temperature by a gas flame underneath, and then quickly returned them to a sheet of waxed paper, putting a little twist on each candied morsel by a deft turn of the wrist.

Even Kittie's eager eyes could detect no tremor in the movements of that hand. It was plain that nothing had happened to disturb Hilda's peace of mind. Kittie sighed and looked down into her own pan of melted chocolate and at the tray of snowy mounds beside it. If she was to dip her usual number of creams that day she could not afford to lose any more time. Besides, was not her work needed now more than ever?

Presently Kittie's curls were bent as low as Hilda's braids, and Kittie's right hand was moving with the same machine-like regularity, as tray after tray was filled with the tempting sweets and carried away to the cooling room by the very little girls who had not yet arrived at the dignity of being 'hand-dippers.' It was one of these who had told the news to Kittie, whispering to her as she brought a fresh lot of fig and almond centres.

'Factory's goin' to shut down,' she had said. 'Mr. Bradford's goin' to fail.'

'Don't believe it!' Kittie had responded, sharply, as a grown-up person of fifteen should speak to a mere child of thirteen who had no business to be working in a factory, anyhow, even if Kittie herself had started at twelve.

'But he said so,' said the unabashed assistant, indicating the foreman with a sugary thumb. 'He told Jim the boss had lost all his money and was goin' to shut up shop.'

It was then that Kittie had put down her wire dipper and looked across at the unresponsive Hilda. Hilda she felt sure, would have that same queer feeling of tightness in her throat at the mere thought of any misfortune coming to the 'boss.' For back of his cheery smile, they had reason to know, lay a genuine kindness of heart which strove for expression in ways that made the Bradford factory different from any other in the city.

Kittie had known so little kindness in her short, sordid little life! There had been a few years divided between a noisy school with a teacher who did not understand and a more noisy home with a mother who, in the struggle for existence, had forgotten her childhood.

Then had come the factory, as a matter of course. Born of factory-bred parents, knowing only children of other factory-bred mothers and fathers, Kittie had never thought of looking forward to anything else. In a vague way she knew that somewhere in the world there were girls who went to school indefinitely, and emerged at some far day school teachers, or forewomen, or perhaps even glorified beings who wore marvellous clothes and called one 'dear' in low, sweet tones when the Pansy Club met at the settlement Wednesday nights.

But Kittie, in her wildest day dreams, had not imagined such a future for herself. She had gone to work just as she had gone to school, carrying home her wages on Saturday evenings just as she had once carried home her weekly reports on Fridays. It was what all the girls she knew did, and she thought nothing about it.

But she did know there was a difference between the Bradford factory and the other big places in town where candy was manufactured by the ton. It was not that the Bradford girls did not work ten long hours every day, just as the girls in other factories did, or that they were paid any better. Competition in the candy business was too sharp to permit any expensive philanthropy. But Bradford, it was generally, if reluctantly, acknowledged, did more for his work people than any one else in town.

Perhaps it was because he had two little daughters who had not so much as seen the inside of his establishment that made him feel particularly tender with the hundreds of little girls who came to him for employment. He would much preferred not to take them at all, but if they did not work for him they would work for some one else, since there was no law that could prevent them from working.

So Bradford eased his conscience by doing what he could to make the time they spent at work more pleasant. It was he who had tried the plan of a fifteen minutes' recess in the middle of the morning and of the afternoon, despite the assertions of his superintendent that the loss of a half hour's work a day meant just as much less in the week's total output.

'Never mind, Tom,' he would say on such occasions. 'If there were no better reason, kindness pays. They work better for the rest, don't they?'

'Well,' half assented Tom, 'it don't look natural.' Tom had likewise protested when a big brass urn was bought, and Bradford announced his intention of serving a cup of coffee free to every employee at noon. Was it not enough to buy gimcracks all round at Christ-

mas, and to send pails of cold lemonade to the work-rooms on hot summer days? If you do too much for people, they will not do anything for you, an argument that Bradford invariably met with an enigmatical smile.

'We can't tell about that,' he said, bringing the conversation to a close for the hundredth time. 'Besides, it's a man's sheer duty to do what he can.'

Bradford's crazy! said the other manufacturers, hearing with unfeigned alarm of his intention to build a working people's club-house so that his employees could have reading rooms, a gymnasium and baths.

But Bradford only laughed at their misgivings. The club-house was only on paper so far, and as for the other things he was doing, he declared them the best possible investment of capital. It was quite bad enough, he asserted, to run a business on the labor of children without trying to do all that a man reasonably could to make life easier and brighter for them.

He admitted that that was something that their fathers should have been doing, but since it was plain that some one was neglecting his duty, he, for the sake of his own pink-cheeked daughters, meant to do all he could.

He never said anything of this to the girls in the factory. He never really said anything to them at all, except 'Good morning!' when he happened to meet them, but every girl in the place cherished the memory of the smile which always accompanied the greeting. Kittie recalled how it had cheered her when she came back the day after her father was buried; and she remembered the cheque that had found its way to her widowed mother. And now the factory was going to close; the boss was to lose all his money!

Kittie winked back the tears and waited impatiently for the 12 o'clock whistle, but her hands after that first pause never stopped until the first blast blew. Then she laid down her dipper and ran over to where Hilda was carefully putting a true-lovers' knot on a chocolate-covered peppermint.

'Hurry up!' said Kittie. 'I've got something to tell you.'

'All right,' said Hilda, viewing her work with pride. She was a young person of slow movements and limited English.

'Come over to our corner and I'll tell you!' urged Kittie.

Hilda produced a tin lunch-box. 'Where's yours?' she asked.

'Never mind,' said Kittie, who had forgotten all about eating. 'Hilda, have you heard about it? Did you know the boss had lost his money and the factory's goin' to shut down an'—' The warm-hearted girl began to sob. Hilda listened stolidly. It was difficult for her to express her emotions in words, but her blue eyes grew moist and her sandwich took on a strange new saltiness.

'But what can we do?' she said, despairingly. 'We ain't rich people.'

Kittie nodded her head mournfully. 'It'd be awful workin' for no one else,' she said. 'Wish I could work for him forever!' Then she stopped and stared at Hilda's retund countenance.

'I've got it!' Kittie fairly screamed. 'That's what we'll do.'

'Do what?' said the wondering Hilda.

'Work for nothin'!' cried Kittie, her eyes sparkling. 'I'll bet the girls will do it! Come along, I'm goin' to tell 'em!' and, dragging Hilda by a corner of her blue gingham apron, Kittie ran down the long room to the corner where most of the girls had congregated for their noon meal.

'Ain't she a crazy thing?' commented Millie Dulaney, who was 17 and had a beau and fine airs in consequence.

'Kittie's all right,' said Rosie Berger, who lived next door to the Maguires, and by virtue of being the oldest hand among the girls wielded some authority. 'There ain't nothing she won't do for you if she takes a notion. Ain't that so, Kittie,' she asked, as the little girl came to an abrupt stop in front of her. Kittie was too excited to reply.

'What's the matter?' asked Rosie.

'Ain't you heard?' said Kittie. 'Don't you know the boss is hard up and is goin' to shut down the factory?'

The girls stared at her in astonishment.

'I told you she was crazy,' said the superior Millie. 'But it's so,' said Kittie, stoutly; 'the foreman said so.'

'Well,' said Millie, smartly, 'I don't see what we've got to do about it if it is.'

'You keep still!' commanded Rosie, who was not demonstrative of her power unless there was occasion for it. 'Now, go on, Kittie. If it's true what can we do about it?'

'I've got an idea,' said Kittie, more slowly. Somehow her enthusiasm was ebbing away, and her wonderful plan seemed less easy of execution and less positive of results in the cold glitter of Millie Dulaney's black eyes. 'Anyway I had one. Guess it won't do, though. I thought maybe we could do something, but—'

'What was it?' insisted Rosie.

'We might work for nothin',' said Kittie, slowly.

'For nothin'!' repeated Millie, scornfully. 'Some of the girls tittered. 'What are you talking about?' even Rosie said.

Opposition was all that Kittie's heart needed to fan dying enthusiasm into life.

'See here!' she said. 'It ain't as if we had loads of money. If we had, there ain't none of us, 'cept it's Millie, who wouldn't lend it all to the boss after all he's done for us. But we ain't got it. But we've got