

AN IDYL OF WORK

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An Idyl of Work by Lucy Larcom

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LUCY LARCOM

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BY

LUCY LARCOM.



BOSTON:
JAMES R. OSGOOD AND COMPANY,
LATE TICKNOR & FIELDS, AND FIELDS, OSGOOD, & CO.
1875.

TO WORKING-WOMEN,

This Book

IS DEDICATED

BY ONE OF THEIR SISTERHOOD.

PREFACE.

SOME explanation of the intention of this book is perhaps desirable.

It refers to a period in the history of a well-known manufacturing city, about thirty years since, when the work of the mills was done almost entirely by young girls from various parts of New England,—many of whom had comfortable homes, yet chose this method of winning for themselves a degree of pecuniary independence.

The writer of these pages was at an early age familiar with the details of mill-labor; and her first literary efforts were made as a contributor to original magazines like the "Lowell Offering," which were filled, and, for the greater part of their existence, edited, by mill-girls.

A truthful sketch of factory-life, drawn from the memory of it as then known,—and a sketch only, for this "Idyl" does not claim completeness either as poem or as narrative,—is all that she has sought to produce. The routine of such a life is essentially prosaic; and the introduction of several leading characters of equal interest has seemed to make artistic unity impossible: it has not, indeed, been attempted.

And it may be as well to say that, while this is intended to be a truthful sketch, so far as modes of living and working are concerned, and also in touches of character and in some incidents, no one's story herein outlined is that of any particular person the writer has ever known.

In naming the book an "Idyl," it was felt that some play of fancy could be permitted, and the necessarily literal description of work-day occupations relieved by glimpses of the mountain landscapes among which so many of these young working-girls were bred, and to which their thoughts, as well as their feet, would often be found returning. The picturesque beauty of the Merrimack, then almost undisturbed, and the grand background of the New Hampshire hills, whence it descends, do indeed make the memory of those days idyllic.

No one can feel more gratefully the charm of noble scenery, or the refreshment of escape into the unspoiled solitudes of nature, than the laborer at some close in-door employment. The toiler is saved from being a drudge by remembering that his work goes on side by side with the grand processes of creation; by feeling himself surrounded with the glory of the earth and the heavens,—at once an infolding and a release,—and by entering into great thoughts and hallowed aspirations, as the atmosphere in which it is his right to breathe.

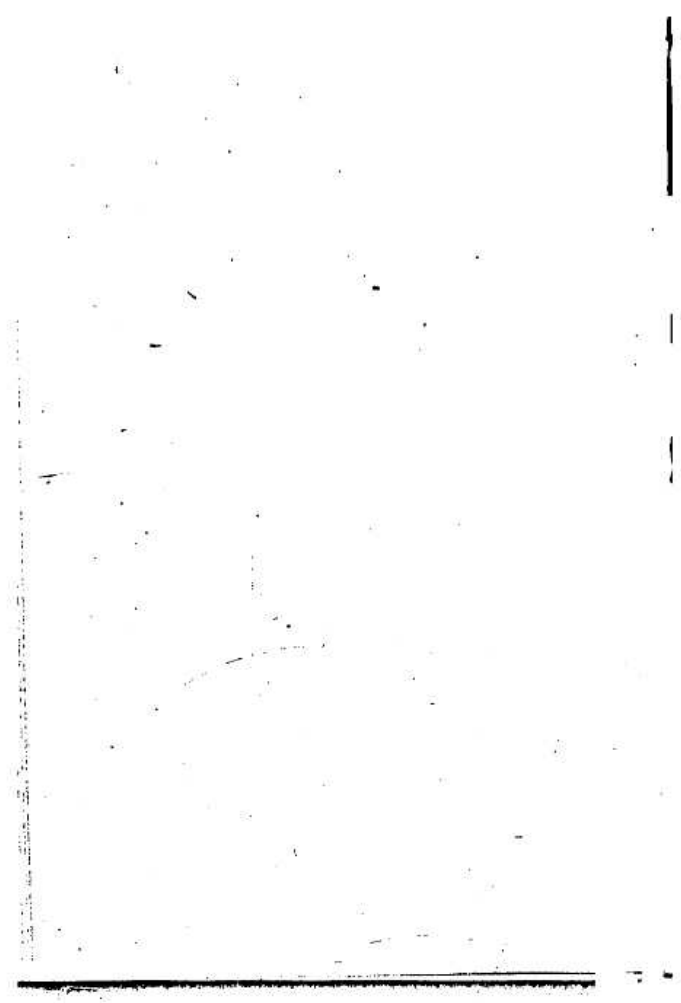
The conditions and character of mill-labor are no doubt much changed since the period indicated; but the spirit of

our national life remains the same. That any work by which mankind is benefited can degrade the worker seems an absurd idea to be met with in a Christian Republic, and whatever shadow of it lingers among us is due to the influence of that feudal half-civilization from which we have only partially emerged, and to which, through a morbid desire for wealth, show, and luxury, we are in danger of returning.

Labor, in itself, is neither elevating nor otherwise. It is the laborer's privilege to ennoble his work by the aim with which he undertakes it, and by the enthusiasm and faithfulness he puts into it.

In our country low associations and sacrifice of refinement are no necessities of the toiler's lot. Community of useful interests, in developing the stronger traits of character, gives depth to the attachments of friendship, and intensity to its higher sympathies.

Any needed industry, thoughtfully pursued, brings the laborer into harmony with the unceasing activities of the universe, and yet more closely into unison with the life of loving effort and self-sacrifice revealed through that Divine Person who has taught the race its noblest lessons of ministry and service.



AN IDYL OF WORK.

I.

IN latter April, earth one bud and leaf,
Three girls looked downward from their window-
perch :

Three maidens in their different maiden-bloom ;
Three buds in their rough calyxes, — for sweet
And rosebud-like is girlhood everywhere ;
In culture or wild freedom, lovely still
With promises of all the undawned years. }

Three damsels at a casement in old time,
In some high castle-turret, where they wrought
Tapestry for royal mistresses, had been
A picture for a painter, or a theme
For a stray minstrel : full as worthy these.

Under the open window where they stood
A river ran ; green farm-lands lay beyond,
And forests, dark against the dreamy hills :