

The American Frugal Housewife (1829)

In this selection from Lydia Maria Child's book, *The American Frugal Housewife*, the author compared the different fates of two women under adverse conditions. As you read this selection, take note of the qualities that the successful woman possessed. During this period of American history, the middle and working classes embraced the cult of domesticity, a model of female behavior, education, and moral strength that limited women to exercise their influence only as mothers and wives.

HOW TO ENDURE POVERTY.

THAT a thorough, religious, *useful* education is the best security against misfortune, disgrace and poverty, is universally believed and acknowledged; and to this we add the firm conviction, that, when poverty comes (as it sometimes will) upon the prudent, the industrious, and the well-informed, a judicious education is all-powerful in enabling them to *endure* the evils it cannot always *prevent*. A mind full of piety and knowledge is always rich; it is a bank that never fails; it yields a perpetual dividend of happiness.

In a late visit to the alms-house at ---, we saw a remarkable evidence of the truth of this doctrine. Mrs. -- was early left an orphan. She was educated by an uncle and aunt, both of whom had attained the middle age of life. Theirs was an industrious, well-ordered, and cheerful family. Her uncle was a man of sound judgment, liberal feelings, and great knowledge of human nature. This he showed by the education of the young people under his care. He allowed them to waste no time; every moment must be spent in learning something, or in doing something. He encouraged an entertaining, lively style of conversation, but discountenanced all remarks about persons, families, dress, and engagements; he used to say, parents were not aware how such topics frittered away the minds of young people, and what inordinate importance they learned to attach to them, when they heard them constantly talked about.

In his family, Sunday was a happy day; for it was made a day of religious instruction, without any unnatural constraint upon the gayety of the young. The Bible was the text book; the places mentioned in it were traced on maps; the manners and customs of different nations were explained; curious phenomena in the natural history of those countries were read; in a word, everything was done to cherish a spirit of humble, yet earnest inquiry. In this excellent family Mrs.-- remained till her marriage. In the course of fifteen years, she lost her uncle, her aunt, and her husband. She was left destitute, but supported herself comfortably by her own exertions, and retained the respect and admiration of a large circle of friends. Thus she passed her life in cheerfulness and honor during ten years; at the end of that time, her humble residence took fire from an adjoining house in the night time, and she escaped by jumping from the chamber window. In consequence of the injury received by this fall, her right arm was amputated, and her right leg became entirely useless. Her friends were very kind and attentive; and for a short time she consented to live on their bounty; but, aware that the claims on private charity are very numerous, she, with the genuine independence of a strong mind, resolved to avail herself of the public provision for the helpless poor. The name of going to the alms-house had nothing

terrifying or disgraceful to *her*; for she had been taught that *conduct* is the real standard of respectability. She is there, with a heart full of thankfulness to the Giver of all things; she is patient, pious, and uniformly cheerful. She instructs the young, encourages the old, and makes herself delightful to all, by her various knowledge and entertaining conversation. Her character reflects dignity on her situation; and those who visit the establishment, come away with sentiments of respect and admiration for this voluntary resident of the alms-house.

What a contrast is afforded by the character of the woman who occupies the room next hers! She is so indolent and filthy, that she can with difficulty be made to attend to her own personal comfort; and even the most patient are worn out with her perpetual fretfulness. Her mind is continually infested with envy, hatred, and discontent. She thinks Providence has dealt hardly with her; that all the world are proud and ungrateful; and that every one despises her because she is in the alms-house. This pitiable state of mind is the natural result other education.

Her father was a respectable mechanic, and might have bean a wealthy one, had he not been fascinated by the beauty of a thoughtless, idle, showy girl, whom he made his wife. The usual consequences followed—he could not earn money so fast as she could spend it; the house became a scene of discord; the daughter dressed in the fashion; learned to play on the piano; was taught to think that being engaged in any useful employment was very ungenteel; and that to be engaged to be married was the chief end and aim of woman; the father died a bankrupt; the weak and frivolous mother lingered along in beggary, for a while, and then died of vexation and shame.

The friends of the family were very kind to the daughter; but her extreme indolence, her vanity, pertness, and ingratitude, finally exhausted the kindness of the most generous and forbearing; and as nothing could induce her to personal exertion, she was at length obliged to take shelter in the alms-house. Here her misery is incurable. She has so long been accustomed to think dress and parade the necessary elements of happiness, that she despises all that is done for her comfort; her face has settled into an expression which looks like an imbodyed growl; every body is tired of listening to her complaints; and even the little children run away, when they see her coming.

May not those who have children to educate, learn a good lesson from these women? Those who have wealth, have recently had many and bitter lessons to prove how suddenly riches may take to themselves wings; and those who certainly have but little to leave, should indeed beware how they bestow upon their children, the accursed inheritance of indolent and extravagant habits.