The Story of My Life by "Billie Button"

CHAPTER VII. *Here's where I show the stuff that's in me, and get due Credit.*

SO away I am sent to the polishing room, where I get the REAL ACID TEST. Into a large revolving barrel I go, plump into a solution of sulphuric acid, weak at first but gradually increased in strength. Here's where I get toughened to meet the hard knocks of later life. My, how it "bites," but I have the satisfaction of knowing that the ordeal will prepare me for service, and for beauty as well, for pearl buttons, like steel, have to be hardened and tempered before they can take on a high gloss. An hour and a half of this, then two minutes in another biting bath of hydrochloric acid, which puts on the gloss. Further details of my toilet follow thick and fast—if any of the acid were left on me, my good looks wouldn't last, so I am drenched with steam and water and shaken up vigorously in boxes containing saw-dust, which removes every trace of acid and leaves me beautifully lustrous.

Next we Pearl-Buttons go to the Sorting Room. Here comes the final crucial test. If we have native weaknesses, they stand revealed. If we have failed to benefit to the full by our factory experiences, our shortcomings are detected. Sharp-eyed girls with deft fingers rapidly sort us into piles—First Grade, Second Grade, Third Grade and Fourth Grade. Some of us, I am sorry to say, meet the test so poorly that we are thrown into the "defective" pile as totally unfit for life's stern duties.

This story of my career is in its essential features like that of every pearl button that goes through the big Wisconsin Pearl Button Company factory at La Crosse. There are, of course, differences in grades and sizes, and some of us have to be bleached in the making, while others simply won't bleach, and become, by special processes, converted into Smoked-Buttons. In a general way, though, my experience is typical.

I was lucky enough to be classed as First Grade, and with many of my fortunate companions was sent into a La Crosse cottage, where Hilda Swenson sewed me on an attractive paper card, along with eleven others of my class. And here I am in the stock room, back at the factory, waiting my call to go out into the big busy world. I wonder if it will be New York or Seattle for mine—or Detroit or Natchez.

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