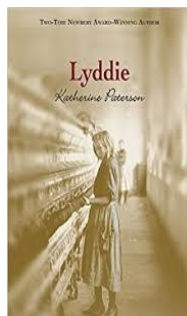


Directions: Close read chapter 14 of our new novel, Lyddie by Katherine Paterson.



14

Ills and Petitions

The curfew bell rang. Amelia came to bed. Betsy did too, though she kept her candle burning, studying into the night as she often did. At last she blew out the light, and slid down under the quilts. Then it began, that awful tearing sound that Lyddie would come to dread with every knotted inch of nerves through her whole silently screeching body. Finally it stopped.

"Betsy, I *do* wish you'd see Dr. Morris about that cough." Amelia's voice came from the next bed.

"I'm a big girl, Amelia. Don't nag."

"I'm not nagging. If you weren't so stubborn . . ."

"What would he tell me, Amelia? To rest? How can I do that? I've only got a few more months to go. If I stop now—"

"I'm going to stop."

"What?"

There was a sigh in the darkness. "I'm leaving—going home."

"Home?"

"I—I've come to hate factory life. Oh Betsy, I hate what it's doing to me. I don't even know myself anymore. This corporation is turning me into a sour old spinster."

"It's just the winter." Betsy's voice was kinder than usual. "It's hard to stay cheerful in the dark. Come spring you'll be our resident saint once more."

Amelia ignored the tease. "I've been through winter before," she said. "It's not the season." She sighed again, more deeply than before. "I'm tired, Betsy. I can't keep up the pace."

"Who can? Except our Amazonian Lyddie?" Betsy's laugh turned abruptly into a cough that shook the whole bed.

Lyddie scrunched up tightly into herself and tried to block out the sound and the rusty saw hacking through her own chest. Had Betsy been coughing like this for long? Why hadn't she heard it before? Surely there must be some syrup or tonic, even opium . . .

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Betsy signed the petition. One of the Female Labor Reform girls caught her in an apothecary shop one evening and got her to write in her name.

Lyddie was furious. "They got you when you was feeling low," she said. "They go creeping around the city taking advantage when girls are feeling sick or worn out. Now you'll be blacklisted, and what will I do without you?"

"Better to go out with a flourish than a whine, don't you think?" But Betsy was never allowed her imagined exit. She was to be neither blacklisted nor dismissed.

Her cough got no better. She asked for a transfer to the drawing room. The work of drawing the warp threads from the beam through the harness and reeds had to be done painstakingly by hand. The air was cleaner in the drawing room, and there was much less noise. Though the threading took skill, it did not take the physical strength demanded in the machine rooms, and the girls sat on high stools as they worked. The drawing room was a welcome change for Betsy, but the move came too late to help. The coughing persisted. She began to spend days in their bedroom, then the house infirmary, until, finally, when blood showed up in her phlegm, Mrs. Bedlow demanded that she be removed to the hospital.

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She didn't have time to open the parcel until after supper. Enclosed in several layers of brown paper was a strange, official-looking document, which at first she could make no sense of, and a letter in a strange hand.

My dear Miss Lydia,

By now you have despaired of me and decided that I am a man who does not honor his word. Please forgive my tardiness. Thanks to the good offices of our friends the Stevenses (true Friends, indeed) as well as your gracious loan, I was able to make my way safely to Montreal. I have now the great joy of my family's presence. Enclosed, therefore, herein is a draft which can never repay my great debt to you.

With everlasting gratitude, your friend,
Ezekial Freeman

She could not believe it. Fifty dollars. The next day she used her dinner break to race to the bank. Yes, it was a genuine draft from a solvent Montreal bank. Fifty dollars. With one piece of paper her account had bulged like a cow about to freshen. She must find out at once what the debt was. She might already have enough to cover it. Why hadn't her mother replied to her inquiry? Did her mother even know what the debt was? Did she care? Oh mercy, had the woman always hated the farm? Was she glad to have it off her hands?

Lyddie wrote again that very night.

Dear Mother,

You have not answered my letter of some months prevyus.
I need to know the total sum of the det. Writ soon.

Yr. loving daughter,
Lydia Worthen

She didn't take the time to check her spelling. She sealed the letter at once. Then, reluctantly, reopened it to slip in a dollar.

She awoke once in the night and pondered on what she had once been and what she seemed to have become. She marveled that there had been a time when she had almost gladly given a perfect stranger everything she had, but now found it hard to send her own mother a dollar.