

The Organ-Grinders

A Word in Their Behalf—Letter From Officer McWatters (Referred to in the Biographical Notes)—A Sad Story—Why the Asylums Cannot Be Homes For All the Disabled.

by George McWatters

TO THE EDITOR OF THE EVENING MAIL: The communication signed "S. W. H. C.," in your issue of the 19th breathes a good spirit towards our sick and disabled soldiers, but evidently was not written understandingly. By far the greater number of the street organ-grinders, clad in soldiers' garb, have been true and honest soldiers, but being husbands and fathers, they cannot take advantage of the asylums. The article on this subject was in all respects correct. Until the nation furnishes homes for this class of our disabled soldiers,—homes which will not necessitate their parting from their little families, dearer to them by far than their own personal comfort,—we must look for such street exhibitions as we see, and which are not disgraceful to the soldier, whatever they may be to his country. That some of these are impostors, I do not doubt; but it is the duty of the police to satisfy themselves who are and who are not, and to treat them accordingly. On the other hand, there are no more deserving objects of charity in the world than some of these are.

In evidence of the reluctance which those who have family ties feel in entering any of the asylums, I now narrate you an incident. Some six months ago I found a poor fellow in this city who had lost his health in the army, in which he had served four years. He had just been sent out of hospital incurable—a consumptive. He had a wife and four children, the eldest a boy of twelve, a cripple, and three little girls. Some one of the customary blunders at Washington had hitherto delayed his pension. The sole income of the family, when I called, was what the mother earned by scrubbing. The father had evidently not long to live, and poverty was hastening him to the grave. When I called, and saw how things were, I advised him to go the Home, to which I would find means to send him. He said he would consult his wife. He did so, and then said he had resolved to go; that he was only eating the bread his poor wife earned, and which his little ones needed. I took the necessary steps, and received from the General Butler the coupons for his transportation. By this time I had had several interviews with his family; and seeing how much misery the threatened separation was likely to entail,—for they were deeply attached—father, mother, and children—to each other,—I resolved to try and prevent it. To this end I consulted Mrs. J. A. Kennedy, President of the Ladies' Union Relief Association, who, having heard the pitiable case, consented to extend the aid of the institution to the family, that they might stay together as long as the father lived. Freighted with this news, I went to the miserable home. They were waiting for me; had been sitting, weeping in company for hours, expecting the separation. I cannot describe to you the joy that filled that poor home when I told them that the father was not to go. Their joy was more touching than even the preceding grief.

Had "S. W. H. C." been with me then, or had he seen so many of just such cases as I have seen, he would be much slower in coming to judgment of the poor organ-grinder. For it is this love of wife and children, which we honor, or ought to honor, which sends the married soldier on the street to beg in this way, rather than take life easy, and "fight his battles o'er and o'er again" in

an asylum. The soldier above referred to is still alive, thanks to the assistance given him by General Butler and the good ladies of the Association.

The asylums, as they are at present ordered, cannot meet cases like these; but they merit help, and should have it in some fashion. The Ladies' Union Relief Association does much to keep a great number off the street who would otherwise present much more disagreeable pictures than the organ-grinders to the eyes of your sensitive correspondent; but their means are limited. They cannot reach all who need. Until the country has reach out her helping hand to all to whom she owes assistance as a right, it is in bad taste to find fault with the mode in which the disabled soldier tries to earn a living for his family.

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McWatters, George. *Knots Untied: Or, Ways and By-Ways in the Hidden Life of American Detectives*. Hartford: Burr and Hyde, 1871.