

Ten Dollars a Month: A Story of Grief and Joy

It is a painful comment upon the state of society, or the character of our civilization, that our most cherished literature, both of poetry and prose, has its origin in human woes and wrongs. "Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn." Dickens, with all his wealth of genius, so much prized, would have found no use for it in a decent world, unless, perchance, it might have shone as brightly upon the face of Joy, as it beamed pathetically upon the tortured visage of Misery. Hood, in his immortal "Song of the Shirt," and the "Bridge of Sighs," and in many other of his verse; Tennyson, in the best of his poems; Mrs. Browning, with her vast power of thought and feeling, to say nothing of many other great writers of the past and present; our own blessed poet Whittier, etc., having given us their noblest works with pens dipped in human tears, or sharpened by human sufferings. So, too, of the great good deeds of the other philanthropists—the Howards, the Nightingales, the McWatterses. They could only have had their origin in the wrongs which man does to his fellow-man in the outrages which the tyrant classes do to the weaker; in the riot of wars for governmental supremacy; in the sufferings of the outraged, trampled into the dust by the powerful robbers of society in their mad greed for wealth, or cheated by pious and talented hypocrites out of their moral as well as physical rights.

Society should be so ordered, as it might readily be, that all the pathetic literature now so much cherished, would be obnoxious to us, as belonging to a state of things which once existed, but which all were anxious to forget; when only the songs of joy should find birth, and when the basilar principles of Christianity should be practically recognized, and everywhere expressed in our institutions, or organic social life. But this we cannot hope for till superstition shall be done away with, the "money-changers" driven from the porches of our "temples;" the poor and ignorant made aware of their rights, and earnest in claiming them; and the tyrant classes come to learn the falsity of their chief "motto," namely, that 'tis "better to rule in hell than serve in heaven."

We had thought to give in the foregoing Biographical Notes some touching instances of the experiences of the good women of the "Ladies' Union Relief Association" and Officer McWatters, in their noble work of succoring the needy, and binding up the wounds of the suffering. We have before us, furnished by the kindness of a friend, a partial record of the Association's deeds (never intended for publication), freighted with notes of bitter sorrows which they have assuaged, and which, written out, would fill pathetic volumes; but we have no space for them here. One, however, so enchains our interest that we cannot forbid ourselves to recite it here, as an exemplary instance, which, if multiplied in his mind by hundreds and thousands, will give the reader something like an adequate understanding of the vast work of kind and tender ministrations which these philanthropists have done, and are constantly doing.

Officer McWatters had two or three times visited a poor, sick, emaciated veteran soldier, by the name of Patrick O'Brien. Of course Patrick could earn nothing for his own support, and depended wholly upon what little his good wife (a comparatively young and fragile woman) could earn by washing and scrubbing, and which she shared with him and

their three young children. McWatters was greatly moved by the condition of this family. He saw that the wife could not much longer sustain the burden she was bravely attempting to bear, and finally advised that, as the best thing to be done, the veteran should be sent, at the expense of the Ladies' Union Relief Association, to the Soldiers' Home at Dayton, Ohio. This was consented to by the soldier and his suffering wife, but not without great reluctance. The sympathy of sorrows is tenderly cohesive and sensitive. After leaving with the family some money for their aid, and fixing upon a time, two or three days thereafter, to call with a carriage, and take the soldier to the cars, Officer McWatters bade good day to the family. They expected him to come for the veteran in the night, for the poor man preferred travelling then, as he got no sleep in the night season.

Officer McWatters was so greatly impressed by the innate pride, high spirit, and profound love of the soldier for his family, so deeply reciprocated by them, that he could not bear to see that poor household separated, and at once interested himself to get an allowance for the soldier from the Association, and thus enable him to stay with his family; and he succeeded in procuring ten dollars a month for him, assurance of which he received by letter, just at the time appointed for taking the soldier from his poor home to the cars. He went to bear the good news to the family. It was so late when he got to their miserable little room (for one room, one bed, served them all), that they had retired, thinking that he would not come that night. He rapped, and announced his name, and the poor wife arose from the bed, and admitted him. The poor children awakened before, he could announce the good news, and supposing that he had come to take away their father, rushed off from their couch, and sobbing and weeping, implored him not to take their father off, the violence of their and their mother's grief preventing Officer McWatters explaining his present errand for the space of a full minute or two. The poor soldier, moved by his family's grief, had risen from that one bed, and added his prayer to the rest, for something else possible to be done than the sending of him away.

At last Officer McWatters succeeded in quelling the passionate storm of wailing and grief for an instant, which he seized to tell them his errand in. It is not probable that pen or pencil could ever do faintest justice to the picture of the gleeful, tearful gratitude which that family exhibited in their sudden revulsion from broken-hearted grief to wild joy, as McWatters finished reading the letter he had received assuring the monthly allowance.

“Ten dollars a month!” A pitiable sum, yet it brought joy to that whole household at that dead hour of night, in the city of mingled sorrows, and vanities, and debaucheries, when hundreds and thousands of the pampered sons and daughters of luxury (worthless members of society) were wasting each more than ten dollars an hour in worse than useless ways, — in riot and “ribald revelry.”

The poor man remained with his family nearly two years; when he died, and was buried by the Association. Upon his death his grateful widow wrote to the ladies a letter (a copy of which was taken from the archives of the Association without their special knowledge, it must be confessed, but by “no robbery” after all), and which we think most worthy a place here, in honor of the good ladies whose charities it acknowledges.

“NEW YORK, May 8, 1870.

“*To the Ladies Union Relief Association:*

“LADIES : It is my painful duty to inform you of the death of my husband, Patrick O’Brien. Allow me to express the deep sense of gratitude that I and my children feel towards your Association for the assistance you have generously extended to us during the last two years of his illness. The value of that assistance has been enhanced by the manner of its bestowal. Mr. McWatters, the kind dispenser of your bounty, has smoothed to the grave the pilgrimage of a proud spirit; but for the many delicate assurances he gave my husband that your generous assistance was not charity, but the poor soldier’s rightful due, the- last years of his life would have been embittered by a sad sense of destitution and dependence.

“My husband served the republic for nearly four years, during which service he was maimed in its defence, and died at last of disease contracted in the service. He could not have borne the thought that he and his little ones were subsisting on the cold charity of the world, and thanks to the delicate tact with which your aid was bestowed his mind was smoothed, and his last days on earth made peaceable.

“Please accept the sincere gratitude and blessings of a soldier’s widow and three children.
MARY O’BRIEN.”

This scene of the poor family, with their single bed, and as they stood in their night-clothes before Officer McWatters, as, choked with mingled feelings of sympathy and a sense of the joy he was about to give them, he read, with tears, the welcome news, ought to be put upon canvas, and hung upon the walls of all the haunts of sin, the gold-room of the Exchange, the brokers’ offices, bankers’, princely merchants’ ware-rooms, sectarian churches, and the other meeting-places of pride and robbery throughout the city, and underneath it should be written, “A chapter of our civilization in the 19th century.”

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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. (848 pages)