

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## A HERO IN HUMBLE LIFE.

BY J. L. MACNAIR WRIGHT.

"The whole problem is how to make bread of the least possible flour, and to keep it the longest possible time without getting mouldy," said Miss Help, looking her shrewdest through her spectacles at a stalwart young workman in a knit jacket, who was leaning over her desk.

"You must cut it closer than that, Miss Help," he said with a half bitter laugh. "Question is how to make bread out of nothing, and keep Kitty and the old lady on it and never have it give out. What's needed is such another miracle as happened in the Good Book to that old woman's flour-barrel and molasses or butter-milk jug, or whatever it was she lived on—always used and yet never used up. That's it, Miss Jane: I've got just fifty cents, and there'll be rent due in a week, and by to-morrow food to be bought, and coal by Saturday. I've walked the city up and down steadily for six weeks, ready to do anything at any price, and I can't get it, and there're dozens of men in my case. This is the first thing offered, and you say not to touch it."

"Yes, Ned; and mind you don't touch it. Better starve the body than poison the soul. Why do they want you to take the money in a Varieties theatre? Because you are honest; but how long will you be likely to remain honest in such company? Not alone in childhood do evil communications corrupt good manners. Which of the commandments, unless it is the sixth, is not constantly broken in a Varieties theatre?"

"You know I can't starve alone; there's mother and Kitty."

"I know they had rather starve with you than have you lose your morals and come home drunk and swearing, or desert them for evil company."

"I hope I know my duty better, Miss Help."

"If you step aside from duty so far as to take this place, you cannot tell where you may bring up. The Bible says, 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed'; and the Psalm says, 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.' That don't mean money taking in a Varieties, Ned. And let me tell you that it is precious poor business policy to enlist the Lord amongst your enemies, for the sake of twenty-five dollars a month."

"Well, Miss Help, I said I'd take your advice,—and I do; but since I must not touch this place, I believe the Lord will have to find some way of feeding me on nothing."

"I should not be surprised if that would be exactly what he did—feed you on what we call nothing. Americans are the most extravagant people in the world. We waste what foreigners make a decent living on. There was more truth than an enormous joke in Hale's story of a man who made a fortune by collecting paper and bits of advertisements flying along the streets. The poor of France could be supported on the waste of our poor. I went to France once for a year, as nurse to a sick lady, and I know what I am saying. In city and country we waste. In the country if a cow or a horse dies, ten to one it is buried as it falls; in France every hair and bone and scrap of it would be turned into money. The swamps behind our cities and along our coasts would in France be rich market gardens; and you workmen would find steady employment in them."

"You know, Miss Help, I cannot go into the country and dig my living out of the earth; for I could not leave my old lady, and Kitty has not been out of bed this ten years but as I lifted her. That makes me more anxious not to be behind-hand in the rent lest we get ejected, for it might kill Kitty to be moved."

"I'll lend you the rent if you need it," said Miss Jane. "As you say, Ned, dozens of men are out of work in this crisis, and you may seek long without finding, but go out with your eyes open and try to strike out a new line of life for yourself. Is there no waste that you can live on? It is better to try to turn nothing into something by utilizing the waste, than it is to turn something into nothing by serving grog in a bar, or taking money in a Varieties theatre. Don't live like a vampire on the blood of your fellows. Don't despair, my lad; go out and try again. I'll agree to whatever is honest, and lend you money for a start in a straight line, but don't let the devil tempt you in your extremity to do evil. Remember, he came to our Lord when he was an hungry, and his tactics have not changed; he persuades many men to do when they are hungry what they would not do when they were well fed and had five dollars in their pocket. There is truth in the remark that it is easy to be virtuous on five thousand a year. But God can maintain your virtue when you have nothing a year."

The young man picked up his hat from the floor, and straightened his knitted jacket. "I believe," he said, "that it will be easier to go out with an eye to inventing work, than begging it with this everlasting 'no, no work' for an answer. I was reading a book by some great man, who had been a workman, and he said it made him sick to see men going about begging of their fellows the right to live."

"Hugh Miller should have known better than to copy Burns in such a bit of pathos," said Miss Help sturdily. "If we want apples we pick them; we don't go into orchards holding our mouths open and expecting fruit to fall in. If work is honourable there is no disgrace in asking for it. Work is honourable and labour is a blessing; busy people are not the cheats, suicides or misanthropes, and as labour is worth having it is worth asking for, and all workers do ask for it. The politician begs for his office, the merchant in every advertisement asks for custom, every man proclaims his abilities and requests means for their occupation; and Burns and Miller have found out that it is a sickening sight to see a workman asking honestly for work! That is mere halldash, Ned. Geniuses talk a good deal of that—for a change."

Ned laughed, said "Good morning," and went off. I said, "Miss Jane, that is a very intelligent young fellow, what is his trouble?"

"Want of work. He has for seven years supported his old mother, and a sister who is in bed with a spinal disease. He has been this seven years in a foundry, but that has closed, and for nearly two months he has been looking for work, and using up his little savings, until all are gone. There are many men out of work now, and he is one of those who cannot get out of the city; he might make his fortune possibly by going West, but he cannot go; the old lady cannot carry fuel or water upstairs, and poor Kitty would find no hospital open to her, as she is incurable. Poor fellow, he is sorely tried."

I had come to the Bureau for an orphan. One of Miss Help's clients had died leaving three orphan children. The Bureau had taken the youngest, almost all the girls there offering to contribute work or money to her support, so that like many another "Daughter of the Regiment," she was likely to be better cared for than any other daughter in the regiment. I had found a place for the oldest, and had come to make arrangements for taking her away on the morrow. Accordingly the next morning I returned, and while I waited for the orphan in came Ned.

"Miss Help, I believe I have found a way of living, if you'll lend me two dollars to set up my stock in trade."

"You are welcome to the loan," said Miss Jane, looking for the money; "But what are you meaning to do, Ned?"

Ned looked down and laughed, rather uneasily. "I'll tell you in two weeks, Miss Help, when I see how it works."

Miss Help looked at him sharply. "Honour bright, Ned, you are not to trade in the crimes of your fellow."

"No, no, miss; but I'll not say as to their *folies*. I shall not cheat anybody, miss; but what my eyes discerned for me yesterday was that there's more money for nonsense than for square hard work. There must be some one to humour fools," added Ned, cynically.

"See to it," said Miss Jane, "that you neither go into temptation yourself nor lead others into it. Remember, it is better to be cast into the depths of the sea than to cause a brother to offend. Now, Ned, I trust you, so be off, and good luck."

About two weeks after this I was passing toward the close of the afternoon before the Station-house, in the most crowded portion of one of our great thoroughfares. Here the street widens into half a plaza, and here itinerant dealers love to stand. A crowd surrounded one of these men, and I heard a brisk voice haranguing the throng. Something familiar in the tones struck me, and gaining the vantage ground of the State-house steps, I beheld the muscular workmanlike figure and keen face of Ned in the midst of a circle of admirers. Around his neck hung by a red cord a tray made of a stout pasteboard cover, and holding large brown envelopes, each evidently full. Conspicuously on the top of these lay an open razor. On Ned's extended left hand lay a bunch of keys, and in his right hand he held a common pine chip. Thus was Ned holding forth.

"See here, gentlemen! here's a trick that will take you two and a half years, practising six hours a day, to learn—but I show it off free to you. Look here! who of you can rub keys with a pine stick so as the keys will rise up to meet the stick? Got any keys? Got any pine stick? Now try it, rub this way and that way, and so, there he comes! there is a key rising up to the stick, no you can't do it with yours. I told you so, it takes *practice*, when you're willing to devote your whole time and attention to it for nigh three years maybe you'll get the right twist. There has only been one other fellow in this key business, gentlemen, and he's dead. Starved! I expect to starve if you don't make things more lively for me. What! some of you gentlemen going off before I've done my great trick of swallowing a razor? Here's the razor,"—he lifted it with a flourish, and the crowd thickened and pressed closer. "Yes, gentlemen, who of you can swallow a razor? Take you five years and plenty of fits of indigestion besides setting out with the stomach of an ostrich as your first capital—to learn to swallow a razor. Oh I'm willing to show you how, free. Got any razors? If you have, take 'em out and do as I do. I hold up the razor so, open my mouth so—but before I do swallow the razor, gentlemen, who wants to buy fifty cents worth of varieties for ten cents? Here in this parcel is a pencil, a pen, a set of studs and cuff-buttons, and paper and envelopes for writing to your sweetheart. Buy the package, and open it on the spot. If any many don't find what I say I'll return his dime, or give him my razor, just as he likes."

Several of the crowd invested dimes in the envelopes, opened them and found the list as described. "Now here's some more gentlemen who have not seen the key business," said the voluble Ned. I shows 'em that, and then I returns to my razor swallowing after I sells a few more packages to any gent who wants to get the worth of his money in these hard times. Pen, pencil, studs, cuff-buttons, paper, envelopes,—all for ten cents!" shouted Ned, in his clear, brisk voice. "Come right up, take the reserved seats, or private boxes just as you like without extra charge. Tickets free, packages worth fifty cents—for ten cents."

Here an express waggon, delayed in the throng on the street, stopped opposite Ned, and one of the men in it began to jolt the street tradesman. "See that fellow on the cart?" cried Ned. "Now why is his mouth like a drug-shop? Can't tell? Give it up? Answer, 'Cause it's always open.' The crowd roared with laughter, and Ned sold several envelopes at once. I came down from the steps as the outer circle of listeners began to break up, and the last I heard of Ned that day was his old shout, "What! going away before I've done the great trick of swallowing a razor? Now here goes for a show!"

A few days after this, provided with a basket of tea, sponge cakes and jelly for "the old lady and Kitty," I climbed four pairs of stairs to the "top flat" where Ned's family abode. As soon as the door was opened by a brisk old woman, I perceived where Ned got his bright eye, happy disposition and keen wits; he was his mother's son, emphatically. "Come in, come in," said the old woman, when I had used Miss Jane's name as an introduction. "I'm afraid you found it a long climb. I don't get up and down myself much now, but once you are up here it is airy and sunny and good for Kitty. Yes, there's Kitty in bed, she's amazin' chipper lately; she's got busy in some of Ned's new

work, and she's quite picking up. Oh, thank you, ma'am, for this treat for Kitty; it beats all the good friends one finds so unexpected. Yes ma'am, we have lived up here fourteen year, and it *do* seem like home; we think the top storey is the best storey; it is out of the noise and bad smells, and not so many people running by the door, and you can keep the landing clean. Then out of the windows, ma'am, it is quite interesting, the pigeons and the swallows flying along the roofs, and the clear sky behind the chimney tops, and in winter the snow lies up here white and clean along the peaks and dormants, and the icicles hang as bright as jewelry." A very poor and common person, you see, oblivious of Webster and Worcester; but these thoughts were almost identical with those of the cheerful *Thénopole* of Paris, whose words have been his fortune. The little rooms were clean and comfortable in a very simple fashion; there was a brilliant "rising sun" bed-quilt over Kitty, and the cripple was busy working with silk, card-board, and odds and ends of cloth and ribbon. I suggested that her disease was a great affliction. It was so, the mother admitted, but she saw also a more cheerful side to it.

"You see, ma'am, I've always had Kitty's company, and ain't lonely in my old age, and trouble's kept Kitty steady; if she'd been stout who knows but she might ha' gone astray like so many; there's a heap of temptation around poor girls out earnin' their livin'." To be sure Kitty's had a deal of suffering; but suppose she had had a drunken, ugly husband, and half a dozen of starvin' children, it would ha' been a deal worse for her and for me. Now nobody looks cross-wise at her, and me and Ned sets great store by Kitty. You don't know what a good fellow Ned is. When he was a mite of a boy, he allus brought me every cent he made, never got candy or marbles; when he went out working he carried coal and water for me of nights, and early in the morning. He never goes to shows nor wears finery; he uses all his money for me and Kitty, and seems as bound to keep us as other men is to keep their wives and children. He's lively and sociable, but he dar'n't look at any young folks, poor fellow, on account of having us to care for, and so not able to think of marrying. I think pity of him for it; but la, Ned says he likes me and Kitty better than all the rest. He's took care of us for seven years, and he did a good deal for us before that, and when his father died he paid all the expenses; he said his father had been an honest, hard-working man, and he shouldn't be buried like a pauper. Oh, Ned is a good lad; evenings he sits here and plays on an accordion just heavenly, and he reads out loud to us as good as a preacher,—don't he, Kitty?"

Yes, Kitty said that he did, and that he always kept his courage up; he nearly lost it, but not quite, when he was so long out of work, but now, Kitty added, he had taken to a street show and package selling, and he made more money at it than he had at foundry work.

"It seemed a sort of come-down to me," said the old lady, "to have him who had always been a steady workman, and with his big muscles, go to cutting jokes on the sidewalk, and selling bits of parcels; but says Ned, 'Mother, anything is more comfortable than starving and more respectable than stealing.' Not, ma'am, that Ned hadn't rather be at hard day's work, but he allus was a rare hand for making the best of a bad bargain."

And what was Kitty doing, I asked. She spread out her work—pen-wipers, pocket pincushions, little jointed dolls dressed, kettle-holders, book-marks. I especially noticed button cards, whereon not the original buttons were fastened, but the edges were neatly trimmed, and on each card was a dozen of assorted buttons, bone, pearl, china, rubber, gilt—the idea came to that me they were *waste* buttons, from store sweepings and from sidewalks; so there were single rows of pins, but the pins were of all sizes and both black and white; little needle-cases held two or three needles and two or three hair-pins; there was a box of broken candy also, and Kitty was cutting motto papers from bits of tissue and glazed paper, and rolling up the pieces.

"This," said Kitty proudly, "is all *waste*, and we are putting it to use. Ned was telling me one night what Miss Help said about living on waste, and it set me to thinking about all the things I used to see when I could run about,—for I *could* run around when I was a little girl,—paste-board, papers, scraps of ribbon from the stores, pins and buttons and all sorts of things; and I told Ned if I could get such waste, I could make up the things for his packages, and he could have more variety, and so he does. Some of his parcels have candy and pins, and needle-books and buttons, and lots of things in them; they are real nice packages for ten cents. Ned arranged at two or three stores to get the broken boxes and the handkerchief ribbons, and the bright papers, and he fills his packets with odds and ends he finds along the sidewalks, and I buy all that a little boy on the turf flat can find, and he's a sharp little fellow and goes to milliner shops and offers to clean walks or cellars for scraps. I tell Ned may be we'll get rich some day and set up a factory out of our waste work?"

A week or two after this, walking in an unfamiliar part of the city, I suddenly discovered Ned in a new stand. As I came within sight, lo the same admiring crowd around the knit jacket, and the loud, cheery voice, proclaiming the marvels of the key trick, and asking how any gentleman could leave before he had done his great feat of swallowing a razor. Again I stood on some adjacent steps and watched Ned.

"Don't go, gentlemen, without a present for your little girl; you know she'll be watching for you, and won't her eyes shine when you take out this package! Here's a doll dressed to represent Queen Victoria openin' Parliament, and here's candy, and a neat little needle-book, and a pincushion, a pencil and a pen-wiper; it's a fortune, gentlemen, a complete fortune, worth fifty cents and goin' for ten. If you don't take one of these parcels to your little girl, you don't deserve to have any little girl. What did you take her last night? Nothing! that was an oversight. Nor might before? What, never? Well now you are a pretty posey of a father to neglect a little girl like that. Here, buy this package, and just observe how these keys, properly stroked, rise to meet the stick. Where is my razor? Now for my grand feat. The Khan of Tartary fainted at seeing it. I