

The Widow's Story.

BY BRO S C COFFINBERRY, P. G. M., MICH.

"How I do despise that old man!" said Mrs. Wheeler, addressing Mrs. Wilson, and looking after Judge Withrow, who had just passed along the sidewalk under the window.

"Despise him!" said Mrs. Wilson, giving a peculiar emphasis to the pronoun *him*.

"Yes, *him*. Why not?"

"Rather let me ask why, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Well," returned Mrs. Wheeler, "I can scarcely say why; but the other day, when the sewing circle was held at my house, he became the subject of the conversation, by passing along the sidewalk, he has just this minute done, with that same straight, haughty dignity, unbending self-pride so peculiar to him, and we all agreed that he was a gouty, proud old aristocrat, and that he cared for no one but himself."

"Of course you could read his thoughts and tell who he cared for, and for whom he did not," said Mrs. Wilson, ironically. "But pray tell me," continued she, "did any one know a single thing that could detract from his character as a moral, a noble-minded, and a human man?"

"Well, yes," replied Mrs. Wheeler, "Harriet Smith said she had called upon him one day, last winter, with a subscription soliciting a little aid to our sewing circle, and he evasively told her that when he wished to dispense benefits he would prefer not to sound a trumpet before him. Now *don't* you think that was very impudent, to say the least of it?"

"I wish," replied Mrs. Wilson, her voice trembling with emotion, "I had been there to defend the good old man."

"Why, what do you mean?" inquired Mrs. Wheeler in surprise.

"I mean to give honor where honor is due, and to rebuke such injustice to one of the best and noblest of men. I can well bear witness that he does not sound a trumpet before him when he goes to do good."

"You surprise me still more. He is not certainly in any way connected with your husband's family?" Mrs. Wheeler said, dropping her *crochet work* into her lap, and looking inquiringly into Mrs. Wilson's face.

"No; he is no family connection of his, nor mine."

"When and where, then, did you become acquainted with him? I did not suppose that you had even spoken to him, much less did I suppose he was an intimate personal friend."

"Nor is he. He has never spoken to me, nor I to him."

"Do you know that he is a Freemason, Mrs. Wilson?"

"Yes, I do."

"How is it possible, then, that you can speak well of him, knowing him to be a Freemason? Why defend a black-hearted Mason?"

"Mrs. Wheeler, I will tell you why, and after I have told you, if you do not love the dear old man, you are not as good a woman as I have always given you credit for being."

"Love *him*? Mrs. Wilson? No, I shall never even respect a Freemason, much less love one."

"I think none the less of him on that account, though I can remember when my blood ran cold at the name of *Freemason*; but it is different now; I love the very word. To Judge Withrow I owe a debt of gratitude that nothing short of love can cancel."

"For what do you owe him gratitude?"

"For peace of mind, for a home, for bread for my orphan children, for plenty,

and, to crown all, for one of the best, the noblest of husbands."

"Mrs. Wilson," said Mrs. Wheeler, "pray do explain yourself."

"I will. You know that Mr. Clark my first husband, was without means, and, in fact, very poor. He bought a lot in the suburbs of the village, and built a small house on it, which was not yet finished when he died. He had no means except such as resulted from his daily labor, which, through the most scrupulous economy, enabled him to pay for the lot and building, as far as it was completed. After his death I fully realized the responsibility of my position. An inexperienced widow, with two little children to provide for, the elder but five years old, the winter approaching, and no provision for our subsistence. The only resource left me to provide my children with bread was to take in sewing and washing. There was so much competition in this line of business in our little village that I could not get employment for one-half of my time. The consequence was that the first December storm caught me without fuel or food. I had not a friend or an acquaintance in the country. We had been but a short time in the State, and had made no acquaintances. I had not a relative in the world but the uncle who had reared me, and he was very old and indigent, and was not within a thousand miles of me."

"On the 10th day of December I had been two days without food. I had husbanded a few potatoes, the products of our little garden, for my starving children. Oh, Mrs. Wheeler!" continued Mrs. Wilson, "you do not know the pangs of hunger, nor do you know the still deeper pangs and withering anguish that the cry of one's offspring sends to the heart of the mother when she has no bread to give. Alas! I do; too well do I."

"On the morning of the 10th of December I divided the last morsel I had left between my two little ones, and put the last chips on the fire, of a boxful which I had gathered the day before when the snow commenced to fall. Without having eaten anything for two days I went out through the snow-storm to the grove, where I found some sticks and brush; with these I started homeward. I had not gone far till I saw Judge Withrow at a distance behind me making his way to the village. I then regarded him as a proud old man, who cared for no one but himself. Embarrassed at my situation, I hid behind an old barn till he passed. I had every reason to believe that, if he knew me at all, he must dislike me, for my husband had abused him. My husband was a warm anti-Mason. His zeal had led him, on one occasion, and that, too, but a short time before his decease, to ridicule the institution of *Masonry* in the presence of Judge Withrow. This had no other effect than to produce a smile from the old man. My husband, as he informed me, became exasperated at his coolness, and reproached the good old man as a Mason. He treated him very unkindly, and, from what he informed me, must have allowed his feelings to betray him into very imprudent and abusive language, to which the poor old man made no reply."

"I went home with my sticks and limbs borrowed a loaf of bread from Mrs. Lisle, and, after a day of grief and despair went to bed at dark."

"The next morning, upon rising, I found upon the floor, under a broken pane in the window, a sealed letter. It contained a twenty dollar bank note, and ran thus: 'Poor woman, keep a stout heart, and an upright life. The virtuous have nothing to fear, though they may be poor. The poor have nothing to fear if they are up-

right. This is your money, and there is more in store for the widow and the fatherless in the hour of need.'

"I could scarcely believe my own senses, I wept with joy and laughed like a maniac, until I startled my children with the vehemence of my joy."

"A little longer, and this munificence would have been too late, for I was near the famishing point. I had begun to writhe under the 'hunger pain' I had heard of as indicating the last suffering of fainting mortality among the 'famishing paupers of Ireland.'

"Ah! Mrs. Wheeler, fancy a scorpion gnawing at the heart-strings; fancy coals of fire applied to the naked flesh! No, no, you cannot. It is only those who have felt Death's cold fingers stealing along their pulses, and his chill, damp breath fanning their cheeks, that can know the pangs of starvation."

"Of the source of this gratuity, and the kind, the comforting, the blessed words which the letter contained, I could not form the remotest apprehension. But there they were. I was happy."

"From that day forward, the same blessed handwriting, accompanied by a like donation and a few brief words of encouragement, periodically found its way through the broken pane of my window; but the kind hand that fed the widow and orphans was still unknown to me. From that day neither I nor my little ones wanted anything."

"The spring came, and the price of flour arose to eleven dollars per barrel, and was very scarce in the market. I would not, in fact I could not, indulge in the luxury of wheat bread at such a price and used Indian meal instead of flour, altogether."

"One day my little girl came running through the gate, shouting at the top of her voice, 'O, ma, I've got a piece of wheat bread, I've got a piece of wheat bread!' Just as she entered the gate Judge Withrow passed along. I was overwhelmed with mortification, for I knew he must have heard what the child said."

"The night following, about twelve o'clock, I was alarmed by a noise at the gate. I stole to my chamber window, and concealing myself behind the curtains, looked out. The moon was at the full and her pure silver light rendered objects almost as distinct as the noonday sun. What was my surprise on seeing old Judge Withrow at the gate, straining every nerve to ease down a barrel from a wheelbarrow! What could it mean? At last, but with considerable noise, he succeeded in letting the barrel down to the ground, which from the manner in which he handled it, appeared to be filled with some heavy substance. Panting with the exertion, the old man bared his head, and fanning himself with his hat, turned his face in the direction of the window where I stood concealed. There he stood, the good Samaritan, for nearly a minute, the moonlight falling upon his broad forehead and flushed face, and giving a silver brilliancy to his white hair as it yielded in fitful flutterings to the motions of his hat, with which he fanned fresh currents of air into his face. Laying his hat upon the wheelbarrow, he softly opened the gate, and then commenced another struggle to raise it over the threshold. His effort was unsuccessful; the barrel rolled back. After some time spent in vain, the poor old man arose from his labor, and wiping the perspiration from his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief, he again stood some time. After several fruitless efforts, he at last succeeded, and rolled the barrel along the grassy doorway, till he got out of my sight. Shortly after I heard it rolling on

the floor of the little stoop in the rear of the house. He soon re-appeared, and taking a paper from his pocket, he stole softly up to the window, and threw it in at the broken pane. He then shut the gate, and, taking his wheelbarrow, started toward home. I watched him as he retired, till his form in the moonlight, as seen through the tears that filled my eyes seemed to dissolve into a halo of sparkling gems of light."

"I could sleep no more that night. After some time I went below and found the note under the broken pane. It was in the same plain handwriting, and ran thus: 'There is bread' for the widow and the orphans. They shall not want. Be of good cheer.'

"In the morning I found a barrel of flour on my porch. The secret was out as to whose was the kind hand that had been supporting me and my babes, when there was no eye to bear witness save that All Seeing-Eye which is ever awake to take note of such goodness."

"But, Mrs. Wheeler," continued Mrs. Wilson, "you can never know the anguish of my mind on discovering my benefactor. I reproached myself severely as I reflected, and called to my mind with what bitter feeling, almost amounting to hatred, I had regarded the dear old man. While such feelings were rankling in my breast, no doubt he was devising plans to supply the orphan with bread in secret in obedience to that divine command: 'Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.'"

"My dear Mrs. Wilson," said Mrs. Wheeler, her eyes suffused with tears, "I shall never forgive myself for thus having misjudged this good old man. Indeed, how people will talk of those whose merits they cannot know."

"Think of it, only think of it, Mrs. Wheeler," continued Mrs. Wilson, "only think of my children being fed by the man who had been called 'proud old aristocrat, black-hearted *Freemason*,' by their father. He had been told by my husband, the parent of my little ones, that he was no better than a murderer—that he would not believe him or any other Mason on oath; still he had money for the wife, and bread for the offspring of the man who had thus insulted him."

"It was noble in him. Many a man having seen you gathering sticks, would never have given you a second thought," said Mrs. Wheeler.

"Yes, and when my child came screaming with joy that she got a piece of wheat bread, how readily his benevolent soul interpreted her joy, and traced it to its true cause. With what a thrill it must have appealed to his great heart to have led him to penetrate my situation from so slight a circumstance! This shows how diligently his heart keeps vigils for suffering humanity while on his mission of mercy. I could stoop down and kiss the dust off his feet. Mrs. Wheeler, tell the Sewing circle that God will bless Judge Withrow, notwithstanding their decision to the contrary."

"Thus was I supplied till Mr. Wilson and I were married. Since then I have been a rich man's wife. I am proud to own that my present husband is a Freemason. When he sued for my hand I told him I would remain a widow or marry a Freemason, and that, until he became a member of the order, his suit must prove unavailing. He then told that he had long been a Mason, and that he was indebted to that circumstance for his acquaintance with me, as it was in the Lodge he had first heard my name mentioned by Judge Withrow, whose eloquent pleadings for the widow had directed his attention, and ultimately, his affec-

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