

tion—a desolate despair. Slowly the group upon the stage melted away. *Creon*, with his hopeless cry upon his lips, “Death! Death! Only death!” moved with a weary languor toward the palace, and slowly disappeared in the darkness beyond the ruined portal. There was a pause before the chorus uttered its final solemn words. And then—not as though obeying a stage direction, but rather as though moved severally by the longing in their own breasts to get away from that place of sorrow—these others also departed, going slowly, in little groups and singly, until at last the stage was bare.

The audience was held still in reality by the feeling which had seemed to hold still the chorus after *Creon’s* exit. Some moments

passed before the spell was broken, before the eight thousand hearts beat normally again, and the eight thousand throats burst forth into noisy applause, which was less, perhaps, an expression of gratitude for an artistic creation rarely equaled than of the natural rebound of the spirit after so tense a strain. In another moment the seats were emptied and the multitude was flowing down the tiers—a veritable torrent of humanity—into the pit, there to be packed for a while in a solid mass, before it could work its way out through the insufficient exits, and so return again to our modern world.

And then the Roman Theater, to whose roll of the centuries had been added a fresh legend of beauty, was left desert beneath the bright silence of the eternal stars.

Thomas A. Janvier.

TRIBULATIONS OF A CHEERFUL GIVER.

BY WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.

PART FIRST.

I.



OME months ago, as I was passing through a down-town street on my way to the elevated station, I saw a man sitting on the steps of a house. He seemed to be resting his elbows on his knees, and holding out both his hands. As I came nearer I perceived that he had no hands, but only stumps, where the fingers had been cut off close to the palms, and that it was these stumps he was holding out in the mute appeal which was his form of begging. Otherwise he did not ask charity. When I approached him he did not look up, and when I stopped in front of him he did not speak. I thought this rather fine, in its way; except for his mutilation, which the man really could not help, there was nothing to offend the taste; and his immobile silence was certainly impressive.

I decided at once to give him something; for when I am in the presence of want, or even the appearance of want, there is something that says to me, “Give to him that asketh,” and I have to give, or else go away with a bad conscience—a thing I hate. Of course I do not give much, for I wish to be a good citizen as well as a good Christian; and as soon as I obey that voice which I cannot disobey, I hear another voice reproaching me for encouraging street beggary. I have been taught that street beggary is wrong, and when I have to unbutton two coats and go through three or four pockets before I can reach the small coin I mean to give in compliance with that imperative voice,

I certainly feel it to be wrong. So I compromise, and I am never able to make sure that either of those voices is satisfied with me. I am not even satisfied with myself; but I am better satisfied than if I gave nothing. That was the selfish reason I now had for deciding to yield to my better nature, and to obey the voice which bade me “Give to him that asketh”; for, as I said, I hate a bad conscience, and of two bad consciences I always choose the least, which, in a case like this, is the one that incensed political economy gives me.

I put my hand into my hip-pocket, where I keep my silver, and found nothing there but half a dollar. This at once changed the whole current of my feelings; and it was not chill penury that repressed my noble rage, but chill affluence. It was manifestly wrong to give half a dollar to a man who had no hands, or to any sort of beggar. I was willing to commit a small act of incivism, but I had not the courage to flout political economy to the extent of fifty cents; and I felt that when I was bidden “Give to him that asketh,” I was never meant to give so much as a half-dollar, but a cent, or a half-dime, or at the most a quarter. I wished I had a quarter. I would gladly have given a quarter, but there was nothing in my pocket but that fatal, that inexorably indivisible half-dollar, the continent of two quarters, but not practically a quarter. I would have asked anybody in sight to change it for me, but there was no one passing; it was a quiet street of brownstone dwellings, and not a thronged thoroughfare at any time. At that hour of the late afternoon it was deserted, ex-

cept for the beggar and myself; and I am not sure that he had any business to be sitting there, on the steps of another man's house, or that I had the right to encourage his invasion by giving him anything. For a moment I did not know quite what to do. To be sure, I was not bound to the man in any way. He had not asked me for charity, and I had barely paused before him; I could go on, and ignore the incident. I thought of doing this, but then I thought of the bad conscience I should be certain to have, and I could not go on. I glanced across the street, and near the corner I saw a decent-looking restaurant; and "Wait a minute," I said to the man, as if he were likely to go away, and I ran across to get my half-dollar changed at the restaurant.

I was now quite resolved to give him a quarter, and be done with it; the thing was getting to be a bore. But when I entered the restaurant I saw no one there but a young man quite at the end of a long room; and when he had come all the way forward to find what I wanted, I was ashamed to ask him to change my half-dollar, and I pretended that I wanted a package of Sweet Caporal cigarettes, which I did not want, and which it was a pure waste for me to buy, since I do not smoke, though doubtless it was better to buy them and encourage commerce, than to give the half-dollar and encourage beggary. At any rate, I instinctively felt that I had political economy on my side in the transaction, and I made haste to go back to the man on the steps, and secure myself with Christian charity too. On the way over to him, however, I decided that I would not give him a quarter, and I ended by poisoning fifteen cents on one of his outstretched stumps.

He seemed very grateful, and thanked me earnestly, with a little note of surprise in his voice, as if he were not used to such splendid charity as that; and in fact, I suppose very few people gave so handsomely to him. He spoke with a German accent; and when I asked him how he had lost his hands, he answered, "Frost. Frozen off, here in the city." I could not go on and ask him for further particulars, for I thought it but too likely that he had been drunk when exposed to weather that would freeze one's hands off, and that he was now paying the penalty of his debauchery. I was in no wise so much at peace with myself as I had expected to be; and I was still less so when a young girl halted as she came by, and, seeing what I had done, and hearing what the man said, put a dime on the other stump. She looked poor herself; her sack was quite shabby about the seams. I did not think she could afford to give so much to a single beggar, and I was aware of having tempted her to the excess by my own profusion. If she had seen me giving

the man only a nickel, she would perhaps have given him a cent, which was probably all she could afford.

II.

I CAME away feeling indescribably squalid. I perceived now that I could have taken my stand upon the high ground of discouraging street beggary, and given nothing; but having once lowered myself to the level of the early Christians, I ought to have given the half-dollar. It did not console me to remember the surprise in the man's gratitude, and to reflect that I had probably given him at least three times as much as he usually got from the tenderest-hearted people. I perceived that I had been the divinely appointed bearer of half a dollar to his mutilation and his misery, and I had given him fifteen cents out of it, and wasted ten, and kept the other twenty-five; in other words, I had embezzled the greater part of the money intrusted to me for him.

When I got home, and told them at dinner just what I had done, they all agreed that I had done a mighty shabby thing. I do not know whether the reader will agree with them or not—perhaps I would rather not know; and on the other hand, I shall not ask him what he would have done in the like case. Now that it is laid before him in all its shameless nakedness, I dare say he will pretend that he would have given the half-dollar. But I doubt if he would; and there is a curious principle governing this whole matter of giving, which I would like him to consider with me. Charity is a very simple thing when you look at it from the standpoint of the good Christian, but it is very complex when you look at it from the standpoint of the good citizen; and there seems to be an instinctive effort on our part to reconcile two duties by a certain proportion which we observe in giving. Whether we say so to ourselves or not, we behave as if it would be the wildest folly to give at all in the measure Christ bade; and by an apt psychological juggle we adjust our succor to the various degrees of need that present themselves. To the absolutely destitute it is plain that anything will be better than nothing, and so we give the smallest charity to those who need charity most. I dare say people will deny this, but it is true, all the same, as the reader will allow when he thinks about it. We act upon a kind of logic in the matter, though I do not suppose many act consciously upon it. Here is a man whispering to you in the dark that he has not had anything to eat all day, and does not know where to sleep. Shall you give him a dollar to get a good supper and a decent lodging? Certainly not: you shall give him a dime, and trust that some one else will give

him another; or if you have some charity tickets about you, then you give him one of them, and go away feeling that you have at once befriended and outwitted him; for the supposition is that he is a fraud, and has been trying to work you.

This is not a question which affects the excellence of the charities system. I know how good and kind and just that is; but it is a question that affects the whole Christian philosophy of giving. A friend, whom I was talking the matter over with, was inclined to doubt whether Christ's doctrine was applicable, in its sweeping simplicity, to our complex modern conditions; whether it was final, whether it was the last word, as we say. Of course it does seem a little absurd to give to him that asketh, when you do not know what he is going to do with the money, and when you do not know whether he has not come to want by his own fault, or whether he is really in want.

III.

I MUST say that his statement of his own case is usually incoherent, and sometimes seems even a little fabulous. The poor fellows have very little imagination or invention; they might almost as well be realistic novelists. I find that those who strike me for a night's lodging, when they stop me in the street at night, come as a rule from Pittsburg, and are iron-workers of some sort; the last one said he was a puddler, "A skilled mechanic," he explained—"what is called a skilled mechanic"; and of course he was only watching for some chance to get back to Pittsburg, though there was no chance of work, from what he told me, after he got there. On the other hand, I find that most of those who ask by day for money to get a dinner are from Philadelphia, or the rural parts of eastern Pennsylvania, though within six months I have extended hospitality (I think that is the right phrase) to two architectural draftsmen from Boston. They were both entirely decent-looking, sober-looking young men, who spoke like men of education, and they each gratefully accepted a quarter from me. I do not attempt to account for them, for they made no attempt to account for themselves; and I think the effect was more artistic so.

I am rarely approached by any professed New Yorker, which is perhaps a proof of the superior industry or prosperity of our city; but now and then a fellow-citizen who has fallen out asks me for money in the street, and perhaps goes straight and spends it for drink. Drink, however, is as necessary in some forms as food itself, and a rich, generous port wine is often prescribed for invalids. These men,

without exception, look like invalids, and I have no doubt that they would prefer to buy a rich, generous port wine if I gave them money enough. I never do that, though I have a means of making my alms seem greater, to myself at least, by practising a little cordiality with the poor fellows. I do not give grudgingly or silently, but I say, if I give at all, when they ask me, "Why, of course!" or "Yes, certainly"; and sometimes I invite them to use their feeble powers of invention in my behalf, and tell how they wish me to think they have come to the sad pass of beggary. This seems to flatter them, and it makes me feel much better, which is really my motive for doing it.

Now and then they will offer me some apology for begging, in a tone that says, "I know how it is myself"; and once there was one who began by saying, "I know it's a shame for a strong man like me to be begging, but—" They seldom have any devices for working me, beyond the simple statement of their destitution; though there was a case in which I helped a poor fellow raise a quarter upon a postal order, which he then kept as a pledge of my good faith. Their main reliance seems to be lead-pencils, which they have in all inferior variety. I find that they will take it kindly if you do not want any change back when you have given them a coin worth more than they asked for the pencil, and that they will even let you off without taking the pencil after you have bought it. In the end you have to use some means to save yourself from the accumulation of pencils, unless you are willing to burn them for kindling-wood; and I find the simplest way is not to take them after you have paid for them. It is amusing how quickly you can establish a comity with these pencil people; they will not only let you leave your pencils with them, but they will sometimes excuse you from buying if you remind them that you have bought of them lately. Then, if they do not remember you, they at least smile politely, and pretend to do so.

IV.

OUGHT one to give money to a hand-organist, who is manifestly making himself a nuisance before the door of some one else? I have asked myself this when I have been tempted, and I am not yet quite clear about it. At present, therefore, I give only to the inaudible street minstrels, who earn an honest living, and make no noise about it. I cannot think that a ballad-singer on Sixth Avenue, who pours forth his artless lay amid the roar and rattle of the elevated trains, the jangle and clatter of the horse-cars, the bang of the grocers' carts, and the thunder of the express-wagons, is practically molesting anybody; and

I believe that one can reward his innocent efforts without wronging the neighbors. It is always amusing to have him stop in his most effective phrase to say, "Thank you, thank you, sir," and then go on again. The other day, as I dropped my contribution into the extended hat, I asked, "How is business?" and the singer interrupted himself to answer, "Nothing-to-brag-of-sir-thank-you," and resumed with continuous tenderness the "ditty of no tone" that he was piping to the inattentive uproar of the street.

It may be doubted whether a balladist who is not making himself heard is earning his money; but, on the other hand, it may be asked if he is not less regrettable for that reason. A great many good people do not earn their money, and yet by universal consent they seem to have a right to it. We cannot oblige the poor to earn their money, any more than the rich, without attacking the principle on which society is based, and classing ourselves with its enemies. If people get money out of other people, we ought not to ask how they get it, whether it is much or little; and I, at any rate, will not scan too closely the honesty of the inaudible balladist of the avenue. Neither will I question the gains of those silentious minstrels who grind small, mute organs at the corners of the pavement, with a little tin cup beside them to receive tribute. They are usually old, old women, and I suppose Italians; but they seem not to be very distinctively anything. How they can sit upon the cold stone all day long without taking their deaths, passes me to say; and I am inclined to think that they do really earn their money, if not as minstrels, then as monuments of human endurance. The average American grandmother would sneeze in five seconds, under the same conditions, and be laid up for the rest of the winter. But these hardy aliens remain unaffected by cold or wet, light or dark. One night I came upon one sleeping on her curbstone,—such a small, dull wad of outworn womanhood!—her gray old head bent upon her knees, and her withered arms wound in her thin shawl. It was very chill that night, with a sharp wind sweeping the street that the Street Department had neglected; but this poor old thing slept on, while I stood by her, trying to imagine her short and simple annals: a dim, far-off childhood in some peasant hut, a girlhood with its tender dreams, a motherhood with its cares, a grandmotherhood with its pains—the whole round of woman's life, with want through all, wound into this last result of houseless age at my feet. How much of human life comes to no more—if indeed, one ought not to say how little comes to so much! I sighed, as people of feeling used to do in the eighteenth century, and dropped

a dime into the tin cup. The sound startled the beldam, and I hope that before she woke and looked up at me she had time to dream riches and luxury for the rest of her life. "*Bella musica!*" I said, with a fine irony, and she smiled and shrugged, and began to feel for the handle of her organ, as if she were willing to begin giving me my money's worth on the spot. If we did not see such sights every day, how impossible they would seem!

V.

THE whole spectacle of poverty, indeed, is incredible. As soon as you cease to have it before your eyes,—even when you have it before your eyes,—you can hardly believe it, and that is perhaps why so many people deny that it exists, or is much more than a superstition of the sentimentalist. When I get back into my own comfortable room, among my papers and books, I remember it as I remember something at the theater. It seems to have been turned off, as Niagara does, when you come away. The difficulty here in New York is that the moment you go out again, you find it turned on, full tide. I used to live in a country supposed to be peculiarly infested by beggars; but I believe I was not so much asked for charity in Venice as I am in New York. There are as many beggars on our streets, and as for the organized efforts to get at one's compassion, there is no parallel for New York anywhere. The letters asking aid for air funds, salt and fresh, for homes and shelters, for reading-rooms and eating-rooms, for hospitals and refuges, for the lame, halt, and blind, for the old, for the young, for the anhungered and ashamed, of all imaginable descriptions, storm in with every mail, so that one hates to open one's letters nowadays; for instead of finding a pleasant line from a friend, one finds an appeal, in print imitating typewriting, from several of the millionaires in the city for aid of some good object to which they have lent the influence of their signatures, and inclosing an envelop, directed but not stamped, for your subscription. You do not escape from the proof of poverty even by keeping indoors amidst your own luxurious environment; besides, your digestion becomes impaired, and you have to go out, if you are to have any appetite for your dinner; and then the trouble begins on other terms.

One of my minor difficulties, if I may keep on confessing myself to the reader, is with a very small pattern of newsboys, whom I am tempted to make keep the change, when I get a one-cent paper of them, and give them a five-cent piece. I see men, well dressed, well brushed, with the air of being exemplary citizens, fathers of families, and pillars of churches,

wait patiently or impatiently while these little fellows search one pocket and another for the pennies due, or run to some comrade Chonnie or Chimmie for them; and I cannot help feeling that I may be doing something very disorganizing or demoralizing in failing to demand my change. At first I used to pass on without apparently noticing that I had given too much, but I perceived that then these small wretches sometimes winked to their friends, in the belief that they had cheated me; and now I let them offer to get the change before I let them keep it. I may be undermining society, and teaching them to trust in a fickle fortune rather than their own enterprise, by overpaying them; but at least I will not corrupt them by letting them think they have taken advantage of my ignorance. If the reader will not whisper it again, I will own that I have sometimes paid as high as ten cents for a one-cent paper, which I did not want, when it has been offered me by a very minute newsboy near midnight; and I have done this in conscious defiance of the well-known fact that it is a ruse of very minute newsboys to be out late when they ought to be in bed at home, or at *the Home* (which seems different), in order to work the sympathies of unwary philanthropists. The statistics in regard to these miscreants are as unquestionable as those relating to street beggars who have amassed fortunes and died amidst rags and riches of dramatic character. I am sorry that I cannot say where the statistics are to be found.

VI.

THE actual practice of fraud, even when you discover it, must give you interesting question, unless you are cock-sure of your sociology. I was once met by a little girl on a cross-street in a respectable quarter of the town, who burst into tears at sight of me, and asked for money to buy her sick mother bread. The very next day I was passing through the same street, and I saw the same little girl burst into tears at sight of a benevolent-looking lady, whom undoubtedly she asked for money for the same good object. The benevolent-looking lady gave her nothing, and she tried her woes upon

several other people, none of whom gave her anything. I was forced to doubt whether, upon the whole, her game was worth the candle, or whether she was really making a provision for her declining years by this means. To be sure, her time was not worth much, and she could hardly have got any other work, she was so young; but it seemed hardly a paying industry. By any careful calculation, I do not believe she would have been found to have amassed more than ten or fifteen cents a day; and perhaps she really had a sick mother at home. Many persons are obliged to force their emotions for money, whom we should not account wholly undeserving; yet I suppose a really good citizen who found this little girl trying to cultivate the sympathies of charitable people by that system of irrigation, would have had her suppressed as an impostor.

In a way she was an impostor, though her sick mother may have been starving, as she said. It is a nice question. Shall we always give to him that asketh? Or shall we give to him that asketh only when we know that he has come by his destitution honestly? In other words, what is a deserving case of charity—or, rather, what is not? Is a starving or freezing person to be denied because he or she is drunken or vicious? What is desert in the poor? What is desert in the rich, I suppose the reader would answer. If this is so, and if we ought not to succor an undeserving poor person, then we ought not to succor an undeserving rich person. It will be said that a rich person, however undeserving, will never be in need of our succor, but this is not so clear. If we saw a rich person fall in a fit before the horses of a Fifth Avenue omnibus, ought not we to run and lift him up, although we knew him to be a man whose life was stained by every vice and excess, and cruel, wanton, idle, luxurious? I know that I am imagining a quite impossible rich person; but once imagined, ought not we to save him all the same as if he were deserving? I do not believe the most virtuous person will say we ought not; and ought not we, then, to rescue the most worthless tramp fallen under the wheels of the Juggernaut of want? Is charity the reward of merit?

William Dean Howells.

THE WORLD'S NEED.

SO many gods, so many creeds—
 So many paths that wind and wind,
 While just the art of being kind
 Is all the sad world needs.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox.